

2010



Seeing Beyond Vision: The Future
of Alberta's Knowledge Economy

Greetings,

During this period of economic adjustment and restructuring, Alberta is in a unique position among Canadian provinces. Periods of unprecedented growth have provided our province with unmatched opportunity and prosperity. This unique position has enabled the Government of Alberta to create an affordable, accessible and high quality post-secondary sector widely renowned across the country. However, unprecedented economic growth has met with an unyielding realization – our province is too reliant upon unpredictable and volatile commodities exports, most notably non-renewable resources. With numerous job cuts and low natural resource revenue, we find ourselves without the fiscal robustness enjoyed in past years. Recent economic shocks have made it all too apparent that the future of our economy must be knowledge-based, diverse and resilient.

In order for Alberta to remain economically strong, diverse and prosperous, it is integral to maintain strong commitments to the post-secondary education sector. Moreover, it is vital to remember that investments made in Alberta's Universities, Colleges and Technical Institutes represent an investment that serves to save money in both the medium to long run while also building the necessary knowledge-based economy of tomorrow. Actively and robustly investing in Alberta's post-secondary education system is the only way to effectively reduce the province's long-run costs while also ensuring continued economic prosperity.

Those individuals who attend Alberta's post-secondary institutions are not the only ones who benefit from the education they receive. Many positive externalities and correlations from an educated society serve to reduce costs in the long run: healthier lifestyle choices; and reduced levels of crime, unemployment and welfare. Recent increases in post-secondary enrollment and strong financial commitments to the sector in the last half decade have set the stage for society to benefit from many of these externalities. Only through steadfast and determined commitment to our post-secondary system will these benefits be fully realized. It is with this document that the Alberta Students' Executive Council wishes to respectfully submit that an investment in post-secondary education is an investment in our future.

Sincerely,



Robert Jones – Chair, ASEC

Executive Summary

This document identifies concerns and makes recommendations to enhance, improve and innovate Alberta's post-secondary education sector. Specifically, ASEC advocates that the following changes be enacted:

- Create a more flexible, transparent and navigable system of repayable student financial aid, which includes a repayment model responsive to prevailing labour market conditions,
- Implement a mathematical matrix to rationalize Boards of Governors regent representation against the Six-Sector model, with a minimum of 15% seats allocated to student representatives
- Streamline the Post-secondary learning act to allow Students' Associations to better address the needs of their members
- Expand Tuition Fee Regulation to include oversight of non-academic and ancillary fees, and re-introduce Tuition Fee Regulation into legislation
- Continue on the strong track record of increasing funding to Alberta's post-secondary institutions, as a means of supporting the mandate of Campus Alberta
- Improve the dialogue between apprentices, trades students and industry
- Ensure LEED environmental standards are met for post-secondary institutions
- Improve accessibility – both physical and opportunity – for students with disabilities
- Address the ongoing challenges of accumulated deferred maintenance

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Who is ASEC?

The Alberta Students' Executive Council (ASEC) is a provincial lobby group comprised of 12 member student associations' from Alberta's publicly funded colleges, technical institutes and universities. Together, ASEC'S members speak for approximately 120, 000 students, or the majority of post-secondary students in Alberta. The organization was founded in 1982 as the Alberta College and Technical Institutes Students' Executive Council (ACTISEC) and has represented students to the public, the government and other stakeholders for 27 years.

ASEC Member Associations

- ❖ Alberta College of Art and Design Students' Association
- ❖ Students' Association of Bow Valley College
- ❖ Grande Prairie Regional College Students' Association
- ❖ Keyano College Students' Association
- ❖ Lethbridge College Students' Association
- ❖ Medicine Hat College Students' Association
- ❖ NAIT Students' Association
- ❖ Olds College Students' Association
- ❖ SAIT Students' Association
- ❖ Students' Association of Grant MacEwan University
- ❖ Students' Association of Mount Royal University
- ❖ Students' Association of Red Deer College

Repayable Student Financial Aid

In these difficult economic times, Statistics Canada has reported that student unemployment levels are at the highest levels since that data first began being compiled in 1972. The result of this lack of employment opportunities is that more students than ever are turning towards student loans and other debt instruments to finance their post-secondary education.

While the Student Loan Program is not the sole solution to student financial need, it is an important mechanism through which students are able to access funding to address the immediate costs of pursuing an education. Increases in the amount of debt that a student can accrue is not the most desirable option, however accessing a student loan can empower an individual to complete a credential that will in turn allow them to seek meaningful employment and a greater future earning potential.

ASEC has advocated for many improvements to the Alberta Student Loan Program over the last decade. Previously adopted recommendations such as a decrease in student loan interest rates has enabled repayable student financial aid in Alberta to continually improve and remain responsive to the needs of post-secondary students.

In light of the recent decision to increase the allowable lifetime loan limits for Alberta's learners, it is more imperative that our systems continue to evolve. ASEC respectfully submits that new and innovative ideas are imperative towards achieving open access to Alberta's post-secondary system, which will be the corner stone of building the needed knowledge-based economy of tomorrow.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Act to provide borrowers with as much information as possible about the details of their student loans;
- Amend the Grace Period so that the six-month non-payment template after graduation is non-interest accruing;
- Implement an unemployment mechanism into the Grace Period that will extend the current non-payment period to an unemployment index so students that graduate into a depressed workforce are better enabled to align their post-graduate career with their credentials;
- Institute a loan reduction program that will allow portions of student debt to be forgiven through active community work and volunteering; and
- Create a framework for graduated interest-rate reductions that will see student loan interest rates decrease based on a student's respective year of study.

Boards of Governors Regent Representation

The Board of Governors of a public post-secondary institution is the highest authority for all business and administrative decisions. As of present, there is a minimum of one student representative on each public board, as outlined by the Post-Secondary Learning Act. Although this representation is appreciated, the Alberta Students' Executive Council feels that increasing the ratio of representation for students will have a multitude of positive benefits.

Unlike most aspects of post-secondary in Alberta, student representation on Boards of Governors has not been rationalized with the Campus Alberta Six-Sector Model. The following is a chart outlining the current representation of Students on Boards of Governors with total FLE count of the institution (based on 2007-08 FLE counts):

Institution	Board of Governor Reps	FLEs	FLEs/BoG Rep
<i>Comprehensive Academic & Research Institutions</i>			
University of Alberta	2	32,684	16342
University of Calgary	2	23,654	11827
University of Lethbridge	2	6,938	3469
<i>Baccalaureate & Applied Studies Institutions</i>			
Grant MacEwan University	1	10,205	10205
Mount Royal University	1	7,877	7877
<i>Polytechnical Institutions</i>			
NAIT	2	12,980	6490
SAIT	2	11,610	5805
<i>Comprehensive Community Institutions</i>			
Bow Valley College	1	3,591	3591
Grande Prairie Regional College	1	1,251	1251
Keyano College	1	1,290	1290
Lethbridge College	1	3,669	3669
Medicine Hat College	1	2,347	2347
Olds College	1	1,275	1275
Red Deer College	1	3,653	3653
<i>Specialized Arts & Culture Institutions</i>			
ACAD	1	972	972

As presented, there is no justifiable matrix for student representation on a per FLE basis. Additionally, there is seemingly no rationalization towards the mathematics that determines Boards of Governors representation. Based on percentage of membership of the Boards of Governors:

Undergraduate Representation on Boards of Governors

University:	2 students	19 full members	10.5% total representation
TIs:	2 students	15 full members	13% total representation
Other:	1 student	10 full members	10% total representation

This equates to, roughly, one student for every seven members of the Board. When graduate students are factored in, universities have a total representation of 3 students out of 19 full members; making worse the mathematical inequity of Boards of Governors representation.

In addition to requesting a rationalization of Board representation, the Alberta Students' Executive Council proposes that the Post-Secondary Learning Act be amended to include a model in which no less than 15% of the total membership of the Board of Governors be students from that institution.

With the directive of the Honourable Minister Doug Horner for students to hold our institutions accountable, Alberta's students are forced into the difficult position of trying to do so with minimal and disproportionate representation. Additionally, much of what is discussed at the Board of Governors table is confidential. Some institutions enjoy a great working relationship with their respective Students' Associations, yet that is unfortunately not always the case.

An additional student representative on the Board of Governors for an institution would mean the student(s) already in the position could be more effective, focused and comfortable. Students are one of the largest stakeholders in our public post-secondary system. Allowing more of their on the ground experience to be conveyed at the Board level will be paramount in identifying institutional inefficiencies, thus saving the province's public post-secondary system countless expenditures while also ensuring the system is increasingly learner responsive.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Amend the Post-Secondary Learning Act under Section 44 so as to rationalize the composition of the Board of Governors at Technical Institutes, Universities and Colleges to enable student representation at equal proportions;
- Mandate that Board of Governors embody no less than 15 per cent its membership from the current student population; and
- Prevent those student representatives nominated to the Board of Governors not have his/her appointment unreasonably withheld.

Post-Secondary Learning Act

Proclaimed in 2004, the Post Secondary Learning Act amalgamated and attempted to further rationalize the Colleges Act, Technical Institutes Act, Universities Act and Banff Centre Act, respectively. Among other things, the Post-Secondary Learning Act provides guidelines and a working policy framework for the operations of Alberta's Post Secondary Institutions as well as the myriad of Students' Associations and Unions across the province.

Acting as an effective vehicle for the Campus Alberta vision, the Post-Secondary Learning Act is revolutionary in its attempt to provide flexible and responsive education for Alberta's learners. While the Act provides many clear guidelines and mandates for our members' Students' Associations, there remain key areas where further clarity and operational efficiencies can be gained. These efficiencies in turn will allow the provinces' Students' Associations to avoid many administrative head aches and empower them to better focus on their mandate of providing value-added services, programs and representation to its membership.

Currently, there is no process for Students' Associations solely incorporated under the Post-Secondary Learning Act to register their bylaws. This is especially difficult in trying to prove registered status to regulatory bodies such as the Fire Department and the Canadian Revenue Agency. These complications only serve to impose unneeded labour costs for Alberta's Students' Associations. Moreover, it is the case that those incorporated solely under the Post-Secondary Learning act are unable to acquire the information of its membership – thus creating many barriers to effective, streamlined and transparent Students' Association Elections and Annual General meetings.

With the Government of Alberta currently considering bringing all Students' Associations and Unions under the auspices of the Post-Secondary Learning Act, ASEC believes now is the perfect time to begin proactive changes to this important piece of policy, lest unforeseen administrative complications needlessly arise in the future. While the simplest solution would be to allow continued dual-registration under both the Societies Act and the Post-Secondary Learning Act, many opportunities present themselves from borrowing from the former and adding them to the latter.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta;

- Remove Section 127(5) from the Post-Secondary Learning Act so that Students' Associations are no longer forbidden incorporation under the Societies Act;
- Enable those Students' Association incorporated solely under the Post-Secondary Learning Act to acquire the information of their members, so as to more effectively carry out Students' Association Elections and Annual General Meetings; and
- Mandate that Alberta Corporate Registry to provide registry service for the Post-Secondary Learning Act.

Tuition Fee Regulation

In 2006 the Government of Alberta approved the *Public Post-Secondary Institutions' Tuition Fee Regulation*. This policy framework protects students from extreme market fluctuations and unreasonable cost increases, thus allowing them to effectively budget for their post-secondary education.

This regulation stipulates the total cost of tuition fees not increase by more than the annual calculated Alberta Consumer Price Index. Understanding that the cost of maintaining quality education increases and a post-secondary education as an investment from both the student and society; ASEC believes the tuition regulation has shown itself to be in the best interest of not only Alberta's students, but Alberta's economy and populace as a whole.

Modifying or allowing institutions to skirt the current regulation poses great risk for students in Alberta. As there is no current model for fee accountability, with a weakened Tuition Fee Regulation, students are vulnerable to be over-charged for fees that should be cost-recovery only.

With the possibility of market anomaly adjustments for specific base tuitions, ASEC is concerned for the work the Alberta Government has done in improving accessibility to Alberta's post-secondary sector. Although current discussion is around programs not represented by ASEC, the Campus Alberta vision specifies life-long learning and a more universally transferable system as some of its mandated goals.

More recently, a few institutions in our province have proposed new or increased mandatory fees, commonly referred to in student circles as bailout fees. These fees like the *Common Student Space, Sustainability and Safety Fee* at the University of Alberta serve no apparent purpose other than to burden students financially for a fiscal scenario they did not create. There is no metric for accountability for these fees and they serve to undermine the vision of an affordable post-secondary education as outlined in the Campus Alberta mandate.

In a time of all time highs for student unemployment, unprecedented strain on the Alberta student financial aid system, and a great need for a more qualified workforce, increasing costs would serve to put up barriers to education when it should be more accessible.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Maintain the ten-year Tuition Fee Regulation as agreed upon by all stakeholders in 2006;
- Embed regulations for all non-academic and ancillary fees into the Tuition Fee Regulation;
- Enshrine this expanded Tuition Fee Regulation in legislation; and,
- Establish mechanisms of greater accountability surrounding fees charged at a post-secondary institution.

Institutional Funding

For the last five years, public post-secondary institutions have enjoyed an increase of 6% per annum to their base operating grants. This grant, coupled with Enrolment Planning Envelope (EPE) funding and “Lights On” money, have afforded institutions the opportunity to expand infrastructure, programs, and support services.

Despite the recent economic downturn, the Government of Alberta has agreed to not cut institutions’ base operating grants, effectively freezing them at 2009 levels. These operation funds were then combined with the aforementioned funding sources to create the new *Campus Alberta Grant*.

Although base operating grants have not been reduced, a lack of increase is, in real terms, a cut. With increasing operating costs and upward pressures on professor and support staff salaries, a lack of base grant increases represents a 1.5% reduction (based on the increase in CPI). What is more, when the *Campus Alberta Grant* is contrasted against the three other funding mechanisms institutions, post-secondary institutions will see a broader overall cut.

These cuts will limit access by forcing institutions to limit seat numbers as well as cap overall enrolment. It will limit the expansion of collaborative agreements and could also force a closure to existing agreements. These cuts will also serve to undermine affordability by driving institutions towards alternative funding sources, such as unregulated non-academic and ancillary fees. Implications from these cuts also affect the overall quality of our institutions by limiting dollars that would have gone to improving existing buildings and expanding campuses.

In a long-term sense, the three pillars of Campus Alberta: Access, Affordability and Quality have been compromised and will adversely affect Alberta’s future in incalculable ways. This serves to jeopardize our much-needed future economic diversity, placing our province in no better position than before the economic downturn, thus making us just as susceptible to the harmful effects of another recession.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Continue institutional funding increases – while acknowledging there are less public funds available, this presents the opportunity for a new funding formula;
- Reverse the funding allocations to post-secondary institutions that will limit access to prospective students for the 2010-2011 academic year; and
- Maintain and strengthen support for the Campus Alberta model of accessibility, affordability, quality and transferability.

Alberta Trades and Apprenticeship

Trades and apprenticeship programs are key to the success of our province. With almost sixty designated trades and occupations, and a total number of registered apprentices 70,415 (at an annual growth rate of approx. 4.7%), post-secondary trades programs are essential for maximizing the output our province's economy.

In Alberta, where a large portion of Canadian trades people are trained, it is imperative that from jobsite to classroom they are supported and given the opportunity to succeed. To accommodate this, the Government of Alberta passed the Apprenticeship and Industry Training Act, which created the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board, composed of Employers, Employees, and Educators in the Trades Sector. Although this Board strives to continually improve Alberta's esteemed Trades programs, the time trades people spend in school and their respective experiences often go unnoticed and unheard. There are a variety of trades student related issues that are next to impossible to address through their Students' Associations.

ASEC, whose members include trades schools like NAIT, SAIT, Red Deer College, Olds College and Keyano College, is often left with meager means of representing and addressing the needs of this large student population. Establishing a form of student representation to the ongoing process of improving Alberta's vital Trades sector would fall directly in line with the Campus Alberta vision of learner responsiveness while at the same time making Alberta's economy more resilient as we move forward into greater economic uncertainty.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Amend the Alberta and Industry Training Act to include an Alberta Students' Executive Council representative as a full member of the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board; and
- Commit to informing, twice a year, the Students' Associations of each institution in which there are trades programs delivered, on the state of trades in the province, as well as any future challenges the Students' Associations' members may encounter as trades students.

Environment

In a time of economic and environmental uncertainty, there has been an increasing call to action amongst learners and our society as a whole. This movement calls for alternative methods of saving money and the protection of our environment. The Government of Alberta has responsibly acted to ensure all new capital infrastructure projects have LEED silver designation.

LEED buildings use resources more efficiently when compared to conventional buildings that are simply built to code. LEED certified buildings often provide healthier work and studying environments, which contribute to higher productivity and improved user health and comfort.

LEED silver ensures a minimal environmental footprint. Moreover, improved environmental standards are an effective method of reducing the long-run operational costs of our post-secondary institutions. There are two designations in the LEED program above silver - Gold and Platinum - each offering more environmental protection and, ultimately, greater financial return on investment.

There are currently no mechanisms or agreements towards ensuring newly constructed buildings maintain their LEED designation. LEED Gold and Platinum designation is only given out after a building has been operating for a select period of time, and due to recent budget conditions, institutions would not be able to monitor the effectiveness of these designations.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Prioritize that all existing post-secondary infrastructure be brought up to LEED Silver standing;
- Ensure all new Post-Secondary infrastructure attains LEED Gold designation; and
- Create the position of Sustainability Coordinator, to ensure all post-secondary infrastructure fully realize the proper level of LEED certification.

Students with Disabilities

One of the most fundamental pillars of post-secondary education in Alberta is accessibility. One of the most important ways Alberta's post-secondary system can remain accessible is by removing any and all barriers to it. For the vulnerable learners in Alberta, accessibility means many different things. Albertans with disabilities are faced with an everyday reality that is filled with barriers.

Many of Alberta's post-secondary buildings were built before modern barrier-free building codes and although much progress has been made, this has not always been easy: many post-secondary policies and standard practices do not always consider those with visible and invisible disabilities.

Access to documents and textbooks for the blind, wheelchair accessible classrooms and proper test centers for those who need it are just some of the things Campus Alberta should be including in its very important mandate.

The needs of disability students all too often go unnoticed, as many of the student leaders who represent them do not share their disability. ASEC respectfully submits that an accessible education be afforded to all Albertans, especially those individuals from the most vulnerable of demographics.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta:

- Create greater financial incentives and opportunities for peoples with disabilities to attend post- secondary studies;
- Restore the *Exam Accommodation and Other Supports for Students with Disabilities* program;
- Actively create equal opportunity for Alberta's most vulnerable learners; and
- Strike a task force that incorporates feedback and input from Alberta's most vulnerable learners to strategically address the needs of students with disabilities.

Deferred Maintenance

Alberta's post-secondary institutions have a pressing and significant level of historically accumulated deferred maintenance liabilities. This concerning issue was exacerbated in the 1990's, as post-secondary institutions were hit hard by drastic and severe budget cuts.

The historically accumulated deferred maintenance liabilities of Alberta's post-secondary institutions pose several risks and threats to the well being of our membership. Most pressing, there are a multitude of workshops, classrooms and residencies that pose health and safety risks for those students having to use these respective facilities. Many of our members have spoken of mould in residences, unsafe workshops and poorly maintained ventilation systems. If these problems are to persist, they represent easily preventable long-run expenditure increases in the public health and safety purse. Moreover, it is the case that the longer these deferred maintenance projects are left unresolved, the more it will end up costing the Government of Alberta in the long-run; as time marches along, the marginal costs of addressing our deferred maintenance liabilities will rise exponentially.

ASEC respectfully submits that clean, safe and secure learning environments are in the best interest of realizing the maximum potential of Alberta's post-secondary experience. Moreover, lagging health issues arising from unsafe and mal maintained learning facilities will only serve to unnecessarily impose additional costs on Alberta's taxpayers. The \$365 million of allocated funding for deferred maintenance in this year's budget will only serve to put a dent into this increasingly expensive and problematic area.

Recommendations

ASEC Requests that the Government of Alberta;

- Deliver a one-time funding package to Alberta's post-secondary institutions so they can effectively address Alberta's accumulated deferred maintenance liabilities; and
- Establish an annual funding envelope to Alberta's post-secondary institutions on an equitable basis to provide for adequate ongoing preventative maintenance.



ASEC Chair

Robert Jones

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