

Our province stands at an important crossroads, one where the decisions we take today will have an enormous impact in the decades to come on choices facing our economy and our society. Our education system, from kindergarten all the way to post-secondary education is at the heart of many of those choices.

The upcoming provincial election and dialogue within our communities offer the perfect opportunity to talk about where our post-secondary education system is going, how it is inspiring Albertans to reach their potential and the needed supports and resources that are required to fulfill the promise of a post-secondary education that is high-quality, affordable, and accessible.

Through our conversations this past year we have come to the conclusion that our province needs to set a bold goal when it comes to post-secondary education - to have the highest post-secondary participation rate in Canada.

A lot of work needs to be done for us to reach that goal. Right now Alberta sits dead last in Canada for post-secondary participation, despite having the strongest demand for skilled labour. We will need to develop a plan that makes it easier to enroll in Alberta's post-secondary institutions by lowering the financial barriers while ensuring quality. The Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS) which represents students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary, and the University of Lethbridge suggests:

- **Establish a goal to raise Alberta's post-secondary education participation rate to the highest in Canada within the decade.**
- **Reduce post-secondary education costs and make clear the rules around student fees.**
- **Take steps to reduce the student debt of graduates and to increase upfront grants for students.**

Alberta should set the goal of having the best post-secondary participation rate in Canada.

Increasing Alberta's post-secondary participation rate is a bold goal - one that cannot be accomplished overnight. We have been at the bottom of chart for years and it will take bold steps to meet that goal in the decade to come. The key first steps will require putting resources towards reducing financial barriers and increasing enrolment.

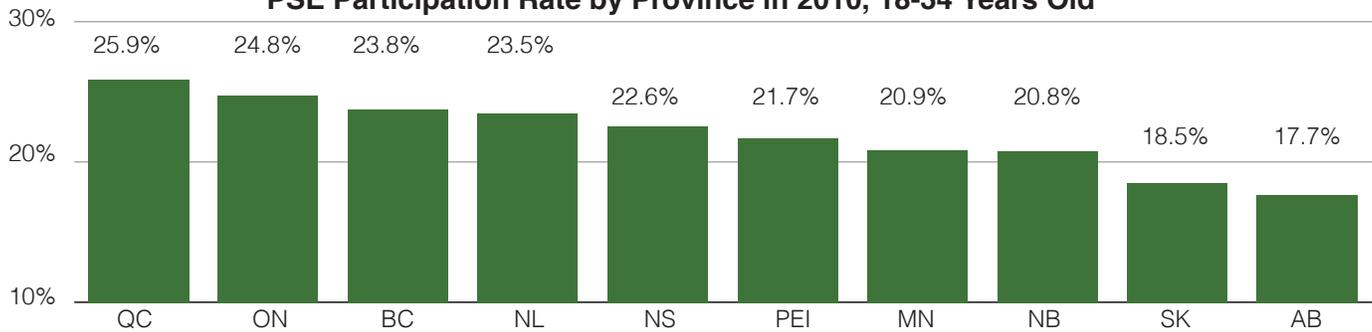
Alberta stands on the precipice - once again - of a massive shortage of skilled labour. Our economic recovery and future prosperity depends more on our people than it does on our natural resources and cultivating that requires effort.

Despite the recent economic downturn important steps have been taken to improve access to post-secondary, such as streamlining of Alberta's student financial aid system and introducing three-year funding certainty, but our system is going to need a provincial commitment to post-secondary education in order to meet the expectations of the system by the economy and of our society following the next election.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP

- **Talk about post-secondary education and the pressing need in Alberta for more skilled labour in the upcoming election**
- **Bring up student concerns about regulating fees in your caucus or in committee**
- **Discuss policies that reduce student debt with your constituency association or political party**
- **Press the new Minister of Justice to amend the Elections Act following the election to make it easier for students to vote**

PSE Participation Rate by Province in 2010, 18-34 Years Old



Source: Campus Alberta Planning Resource, September 2011

CLARIFYING THE RULES AROUND FEES

For three years, since the economic downturn, students have been concerned about institutions skirting the tuition cap by introducing large non-instructional fees. Ostensibly, our institutions argued these fees were to pay for extra “services” beyond instruction, but in reality have been used as general revenue. Historically non-instructional fees on our campus have been for clearly identified services and were introduced only after student approval through referendum or student council vote. We are calling for a return to this practice, and by ensuring institutional compliance through a provincial regulation.

CAUS, alongside other student organizations, has been calling on the government to prevent this backdoor circumvention of government policy since 2009. For the past three years students have been led to engage in discussions with our institutions that have produced results no different than the status quo. Government leadership is needed on this file in order to protect Albertans from backdoor tuition fees.

INCREASING GRANTS

The Government of Alberta recently announced important changes to the Alberta student aid system - eliminating parental contribution, improving need calculations, and introducing a completion grant for borrowers - all important changes that we welcome.

The problem with new loans is that it does not address the problem of student debt, a problem that has been growing in the past two decades. Student debt has a negative impact on enrolment, completion, and the economic choices graduates make upon leaving school. To reduce levels of student debt, CAUS proposes that Alberta create new grants which are upfront, needs based, substantial, and universal.

MAKING IT EASIER FOR STUDENTS TO VOTE

Casting a ballot in the upcoming election is the most basic and important way for Albertans to have their voice heard. Sadly students can face greater barriers to voting and that contributes directly to the low voter turnout among Albertans under the age of 24.

Post-secondary students are identified within the Elections Act as being required to vote in their family’s constituency if they are studying away from home. Few students return home after leaving to go to school and in any case they remain the best judge of where they consider their ordinary residence. The Elections Act should reflect that and allow students to declare whether they wish to vote in the constituency where they are studying or where they lived before university.

Getting people to vote on campus will also improve our voter turnout. For example a polling station was set up at the University of Calgary in the 2010 municipal election. Such an opportunity would be a fantastic improvement for provincial elections as well.

You can read more about the need to reform Alberta’s election laws and make it easier for students online at <http://www.caus.net/publications/elections/>.

WHO IS CAUS?

CAUS represents the interests of over 70,000 university students across Alberta. We represent undergraduate students from the University of Alberta, the University of Calgary and the University of Lethbridge to the public, government and other post-secondary education stakeholders.

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