

## Public Opinion on Post-Secondary Education in Alberta

A Survey of 943 Albertans aged 18 and over  
Field Date: April 5 to 10, 2012

April 17, 2012

Prepared for: Confederation of Alberta Faculty Associations (CAFA)  
Council of Alberta University Students (CAUS)  
Alberta Colleges & Institutes Faculties Association (ACIFA)  
Alberta Students' Executive Council (ASEC)  
Alberta Graduate Council (AGC)

Prepared by: Alex Monk  
David Coletto

## Contents

1.0	Executive Summary.....	3
1.1	Key Findings .....	3
2.0	The Importance of Post-Secondary Education.....	4
2.1	Impact of Post-Secondary Education on Important Issues .....	5
2.2	Importance of Improving the Post-Secondary System .....	6
3.0	Testing Statements on Post-Secondary Education in Alberta .....	8
3.1	Increased Spending on Post-Secondary Education .....	8
3.2	Higher Taxes for More Post-Secondary Spending .....	9
3.3	The Opportunity to Attend Post-Secondary Schools .....	10
3.4	Debt Financing Post-Secondary Education.....	13
4.0	Research and Graduate Studies .....	15
5.0	Evaluating Parental views on Post-Secondary.....	17
5.1	Level of Education for Children .....	17
5.2	Worries about Affordability .....	18
6.0	Methodology .....	19
7.0	About Abacus Data .....	20
7.1	Our Track Record .....	20
7.2	David Coletto, Chief Insight Officer .....	22

## 1.0 Executive Summary

In early April of 2012, during the Alberta provincial election, Abacus Data conducted a public opinion survey of 943 Albertans over the age of 18 to gauge the public's attitudes towards post-secondary education. The survey was conducted on behalf of a coalition of student and faculty associations in Alberta.

An election is an excellent time to survey the public as it is the one time when the public is most engaged and most likely to be thinking about policy issues.

The survey research clearly demonstrates a consensus among Albertans about the importance of post-secondary education, not only to students in the system now and those entering in the future, but to the future prosperity and quality of life of all Albertans. There is general agreement that costs prevent capable students from obtaining an advanced education. For those with children under 18, many worry about their ability to help their children pay for their education

### 1.1 Key Findings

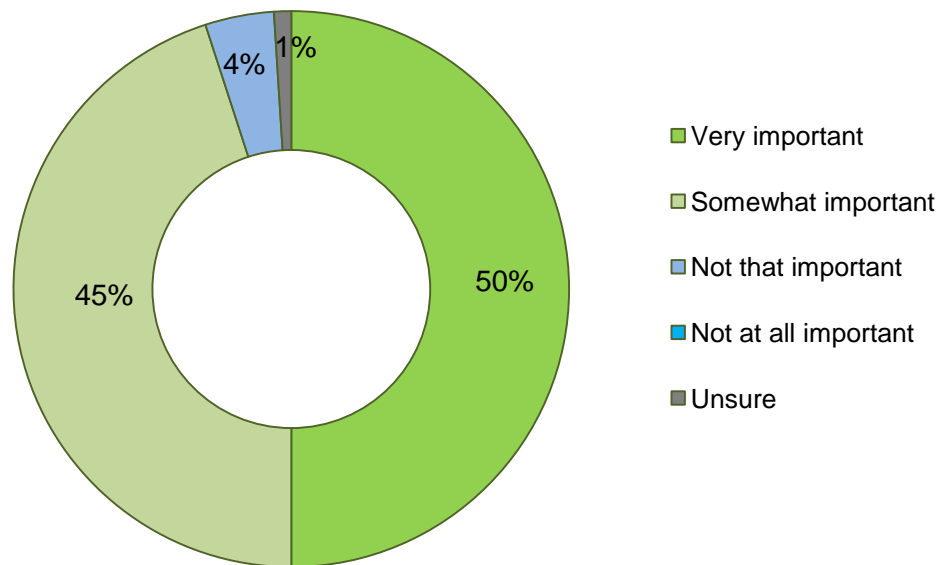
- **Albertans identify PSE as important for the province's future prosperity.** Overall, 95% of respondents indicated that post-secondary education is very or somewhat important to preserving the quality of life and levels of prosperity over the next 20 years, with 81% saying that improving post-secondary education should be a priority for government.
- **Albertans see the importance of PSE in improving a broad range of key areas.** A strong majority of respondents identified post-secondary education as a key factor in improving access and quality in Alberta's health care system, for dealing with Alberta's skilled labour shortage, for diversifying Alberta's economy, and for building sustainable communities.
- **Majority of Albertans agree that the provincial government should spend more on PSE.** A majority of Albertans (59%) agreed that the provincial government should spend more on post-secondary education. Only 19% disagreed with the statement.
- **Albertans feel there are affordability issues when it comes to PSE.** A majority (64%) of Albertans felt that the most significant barrier to attending a post-secondary institution was cost. The numbers were even higher among those aged 18 to 29 (74%), and those earning less than \$50,000 (75%). Most Albertans (66%) also agreed that students in Alberta have to borrow too much to pay for their post-secondary education.
- **Virtually all parents hoped their children would achieve some degree of post-secondary education, a majority worry how they will pay for it.** Fully 98% of parents in Alberta hoped their children would earn some level of PSE. Nearly half (43%) hoped it would be university, 28% hoped for a graduate or professional degree, and 17% for a college certificate or diploma. Meanwhile, 61% of parents reported being very or somewhat worried about how they would pay for their children's post-secondary education.

## 2.0 The Importance of Post-Secondary Education

To gauge overall sentiment towards post-secondary education in Alberta, respondents were asked to rank, in general terms, how important they felt post-secondary education would be to the prosperity of Alberta over the next 20 years. These results are displayed below in Figure 2.0

Overall, a vast majority (95%) indicated that post-secondary education would be either very or somewhat important. There was little variation between demographic subgroups, as net important scores (the sum of very and somewhat important responses) remained relatively stable across age, region of the province, gender, level of education, and political preferences.

**Figure 2.0: How important is Alberta's post-secondary education system to the quality of life and economic prosperity of the province over the next 20 years? (n=942, weighted)**



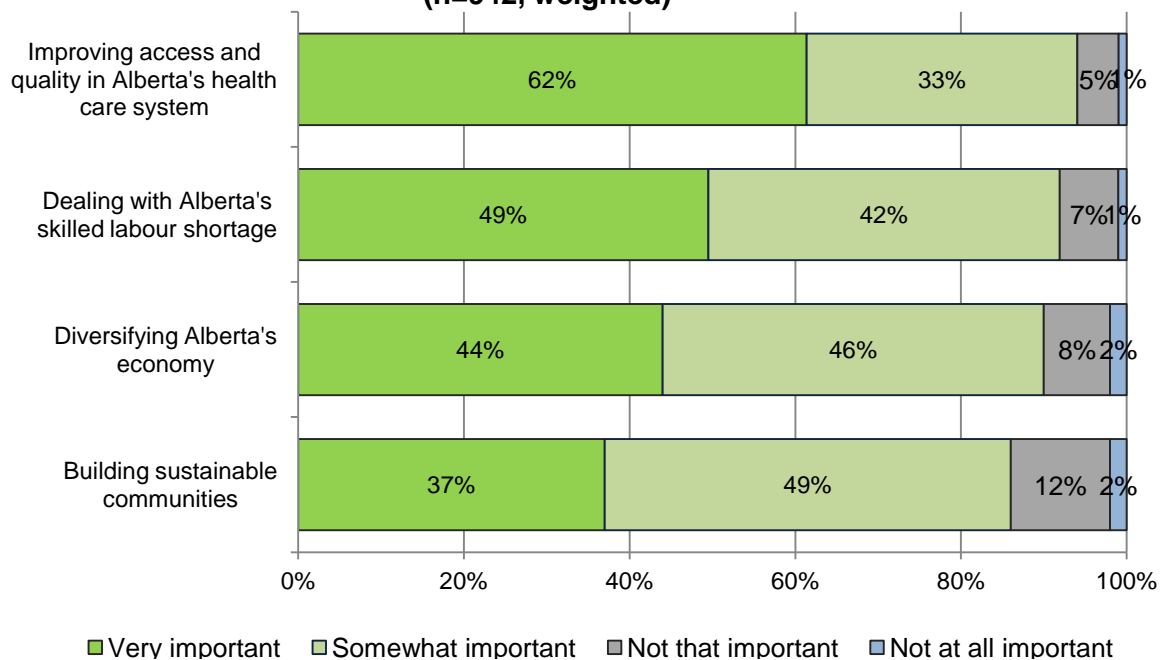
## 2.1 Impact of Post-Secondary Education on Important Issues

To further assess the value of post-secondary education in Alberta, respondents were shown a list of four statements and asked to rank how important they felt post-secondary education is to addressing each of them.

Responses were similar to the overall importance of post secondary education in section 2.0 above; with a strong majority of Albertans identifying that post secondary education is a very important or somewhat important contributor to each of the four areas presented below in figure 2.1.

Health care is a primary concern for Albertans and most believe that the post-secondary education system in the province is integral to improving it. Albertans were most likely to believe that PSE was very important to improving access and quality in Alberta’s health care system. Over six in ten respondents rated PSE as very important to improving the health care system. Post-secondary education was seen as comparatively less important when it came to building sustainable communities, with 37% of respondents identifying it as very important. Nonetheless, a large majority (86%) still considered PSE to be very or somewhat important to building sustainable communities.

**Figure 2.1**  
**How important or unimportant is post-secondary education to addressing each of the following problems?**  
 (n=942, weighted)

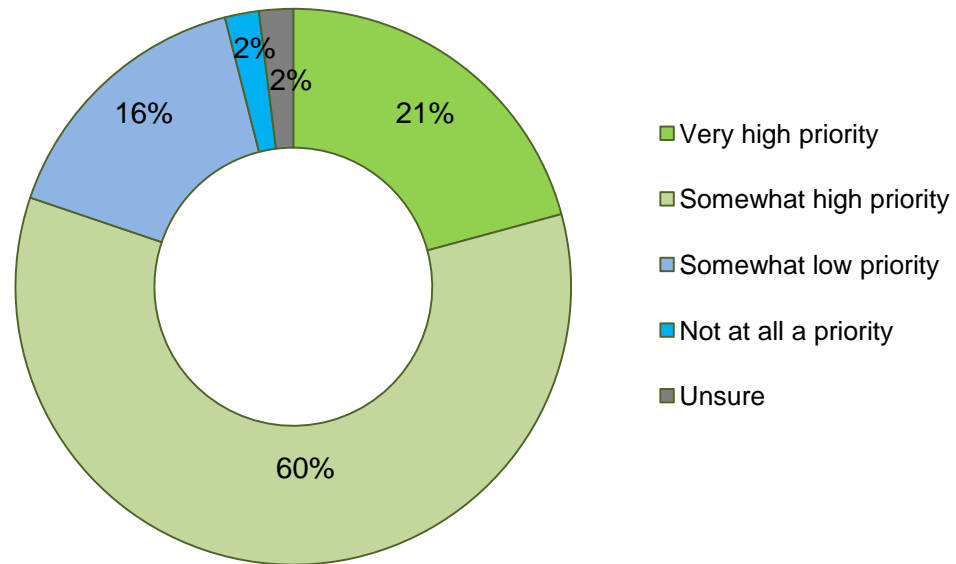


## 2.2 Importance of Improving the Post-Secondary System

As illustrated by the findings listed above, Albertans view the post secondary education system as a very important element of securing both the present and future prosperity and security of the province.

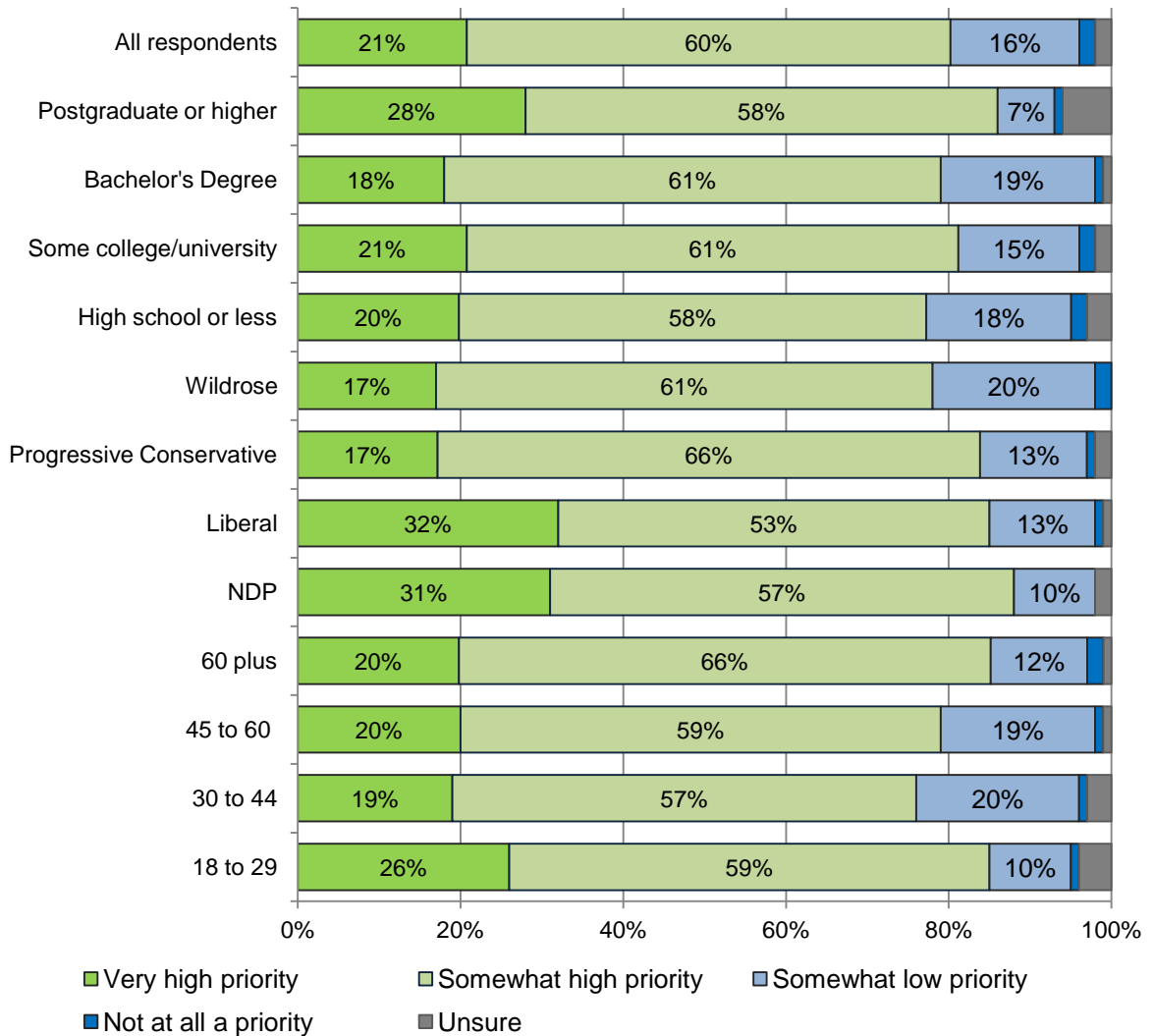
In this light, respondents were asked how high a priority improving the post-secondary education system should be for the provincial government, with results presented below in figure 2.2.

**Figure 2.2: How high a priority should improving the post-secondary education system be for the Alberta government? (n=942, weighted)**



Overall, a strong majority (81%) of respondents felt that post-secondary education should be a somewhat or very high priority for the provincial government, while 18% felt it should be a somewhat low priority or not at all a priority.

**Figure 2.3: How high a priority should improving the post-secondary education system be for the Alberta government? (n=942, weighted)**



As observed in other questions measuring the importance of post-secondary education, demographic differences were relatively small. Those with post-graduate degrees were more likely than others (28%) to place a very high priority on post-secondary education, as were self-identified Liberal voters (32%), NDP voters (31%), and Millennials (those aged 18-29, at 26%).

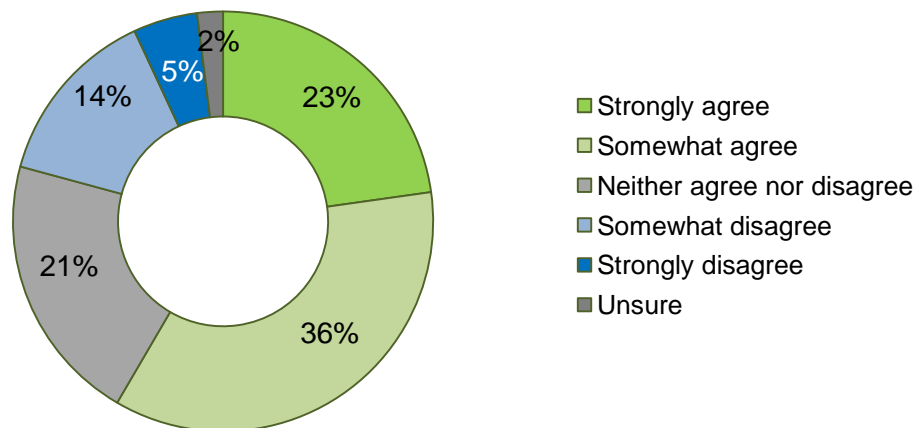
## 3.0 Testing Statements on Post-Secondary Education in Alberta

In this section of the survey, respondents were shown a series of statements related to post-secondary education and asked to what degree they either agreed or disagreed with each. The objective of these statements was to test impressions on the affordability of post-secondary education, and to gauge support for increased spending on education and possible tax financing.

### 3.1 Increased Spending on Post-Secondary Education

In terms of unqualified spending increases, 59% of Albertans either strongly or somewhat agreed that the province should spend more on post-secondary education. Only minimal differences existed across demographic subgroups, suggesting that the majority support for increased spending in this area is a widely held view. However, the large portion of neutral respondents (21%) creates the potential for a somewhat significant attitudinal shift if an event or campaign were to sway their opinion to one side or another.

**Figure 3.1: "The Alberta government should spend more on post-secondary education"**  
(n=942, weighted)





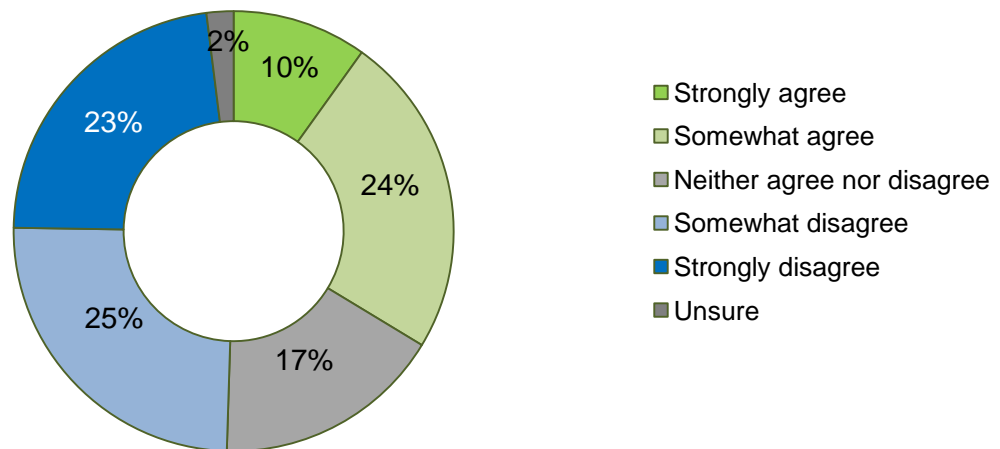
### 3.2 Higher Taxes for More Post-Secondary Spending

Where the previous statement, tested in section 3.1, evaluated overall appetite for spending increases on post-secondary education, this statement added the qualifier that such increases would come at the direct expense of increased taxes.

When associated with personal tax increases, the idea of increasing spending on post-secondary education becomes much less appetizing for Albertans, with 48% somewhat or strongly opposed, and just 34% strongly or somewhat in agreement. While there is a base of support for increasing the funding for post-secondary education regardless of the method, it is clear that increased financing of post-secondary through tax increases would introduce considerable opposition.

Moreover, the increases in opposition were not tied to a particular demographic group, indicating that such attitudinal shifts are somewhat universal.

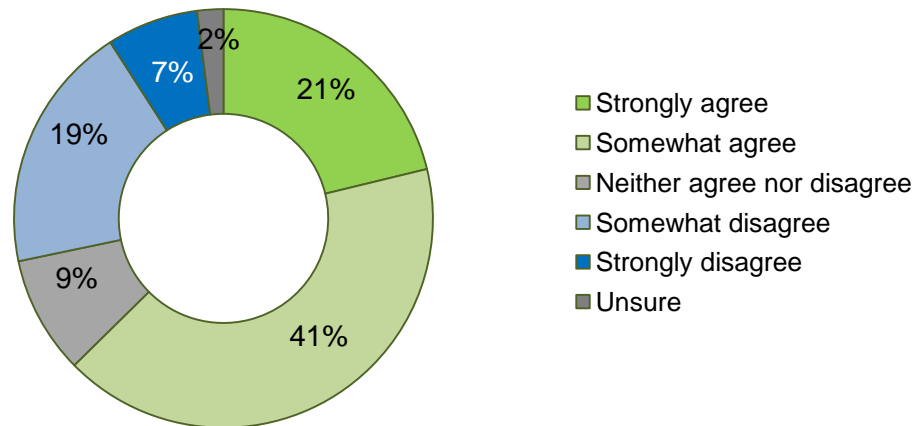
**Figure 3.2: "The Alberta government should spend more on post-secondary education, even if it means that I personally have to pay more in taxes"**  
(n=942, weighted)



### 3.3 The Opportunity to Attend Post-Secondary Schools

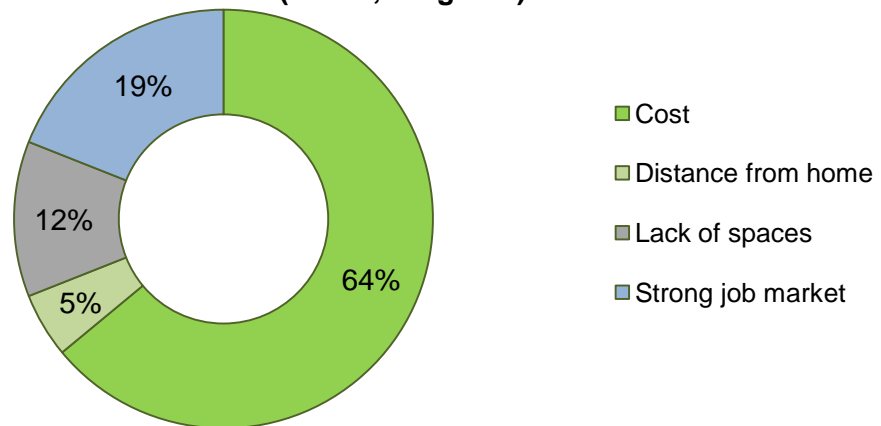
Generally speaking, Albertans don't seem to believe that a major barrier to pursuing post-secondary studies exists, as figure 3.3 below illustrates. Overall, 62% of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that most qualified students in Alberta have the opportunity to attend if they are qualified. These findings were relatively consistent across demographic subgroups, including level of household income.

**Figure 3.3: "Most Albertans who are qualified to pursue post-secondary studies currently have the opportunity to do so" (n=942, weighted)**



However, when asked what factors were most likely to prevent qualified potential students from attending post-secondary institutions, 64% of Albertans identified cost as the primary constraint. This finding is illustrated below in figure 3.4.

**Figure 3.4: In your view, which of the following concerns is most likely to prevent qualified learners from attending a post-secondary institution in Alberta?  
(n=942, weighted)**

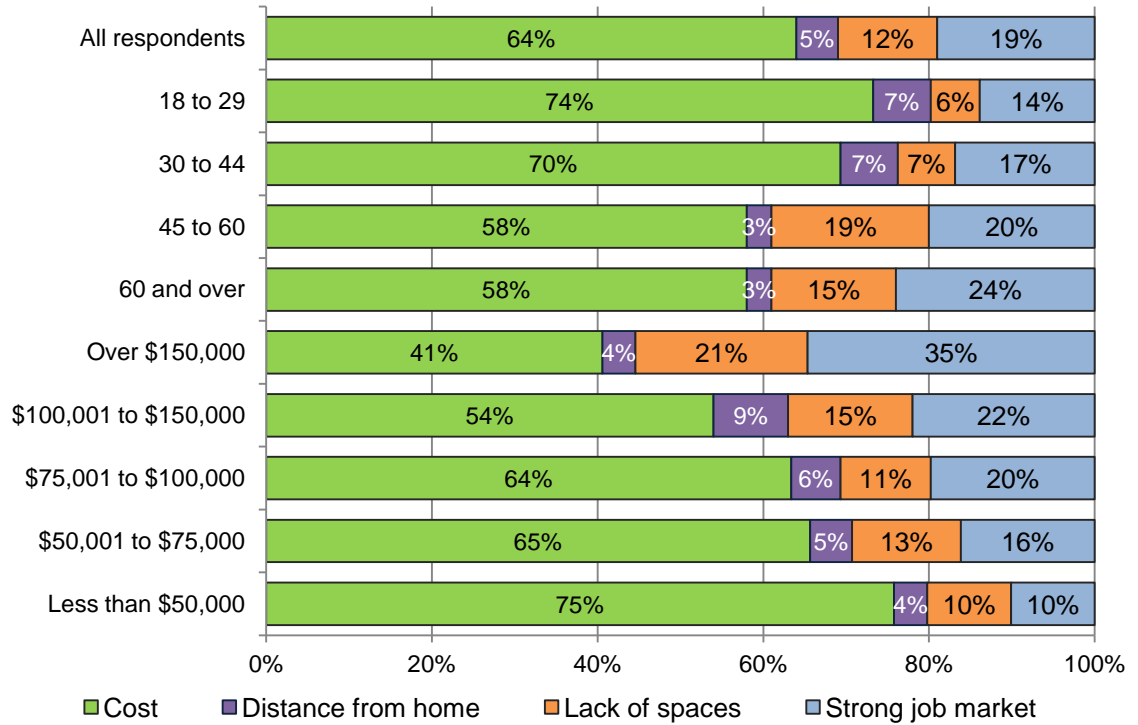


While most other factors did not receive significant scores, the strong job market in Alberta was the second most cited factor for preventing qualified potential students from attending a post-secondary institution.

As reasons, cost and the strong job market were nearly directly correlated across demographic subgroups of age and income, with younger respondents and those with lower incomes more likely to find cost prohibitive.

Although cost remained the primary barrier in the eyes of every demographic group tested, three quarters (75%) of respondents from households earning less than \$50,000 per year felt that cost was the most likely factor in prevent qualified learners from attending, whereas just 41% of those from households earning over \$150,000 reported cost as the primary reason. Similar differences were observed across age; with 74% of Millennials (those aged 18-29) citing cost as the major barrier and 58% of those over 45 stating the same.

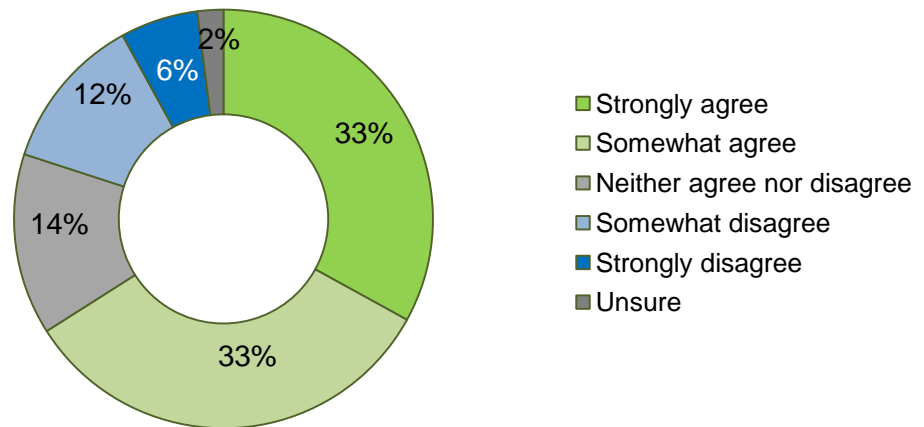
**Figure 3.5: In your view, which of the following concerns is most likely to prevent qualified learners from attending a post-secondary education institution?  
(n=942, weighted)**



### 3.4 Debt Financing Post-Secondary Education

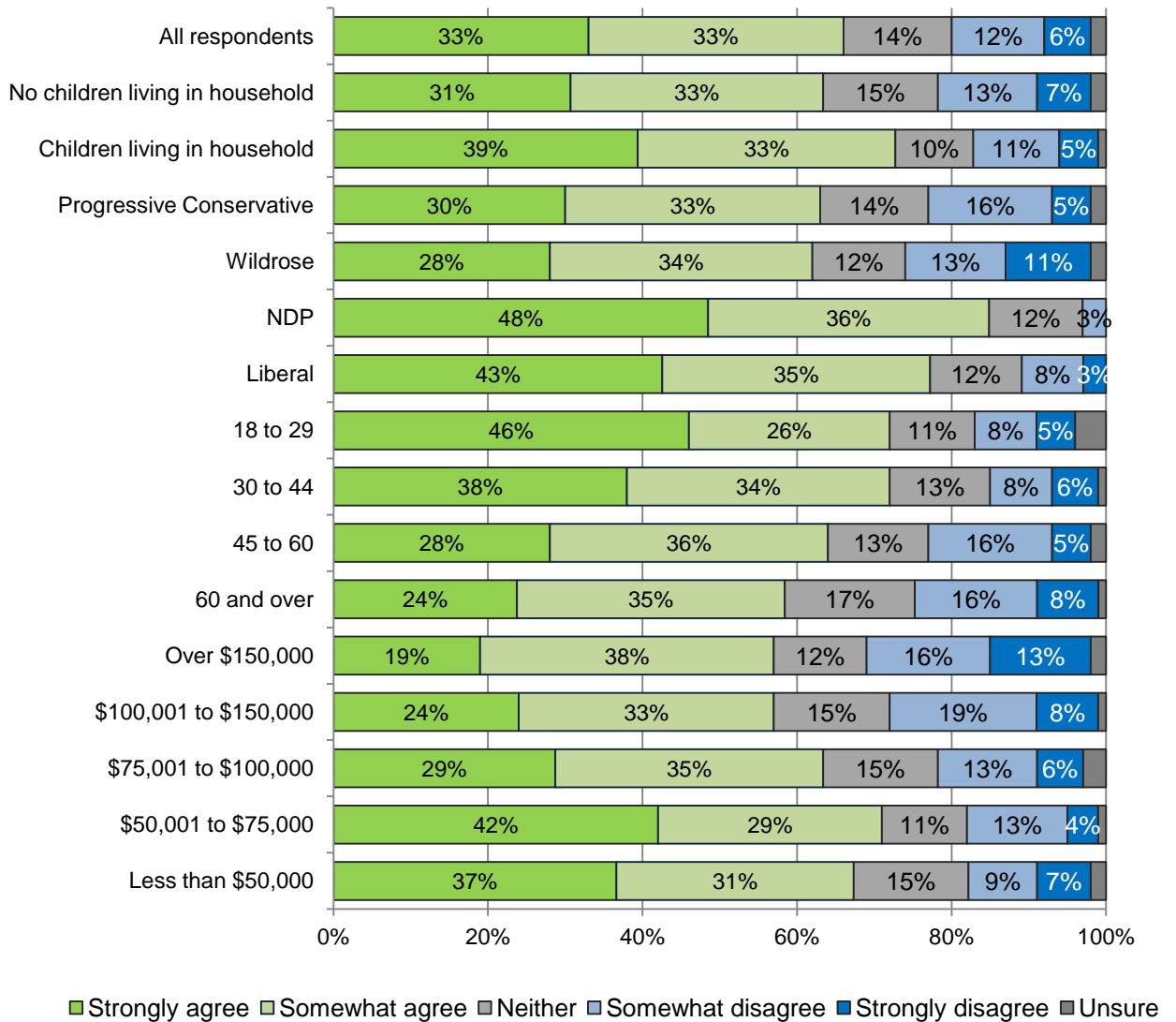
In terms of financing post-secondary education, two-thirds (66%) of Albertans either somewhat or strongly agreed that students in Alberta have to borrow too much to pay for their post-secondary education.

**Figure 3.6: "Students in Alberta have to borrow too much to pay for their post-secondary education" (n=942, weighted)**



As illustrated below in figure 3.7, there were some differences observed across demographic subgroups, particularly across age, income, and political affiliation. Older respondents were less likely than younger Albertans to think that students currently have to borrow too much; households with higher incomes were also less likely to feel debt loads are too high. However, in all cases a majority of respondents still either strongly or somewhat agreed that post-secondary students in Alberta must borrow too much to pay for their educations.

**Figure 3.7: "Students in Alberta have to borrow too much to pay for their post-secondary education" (n=942, weighted)**

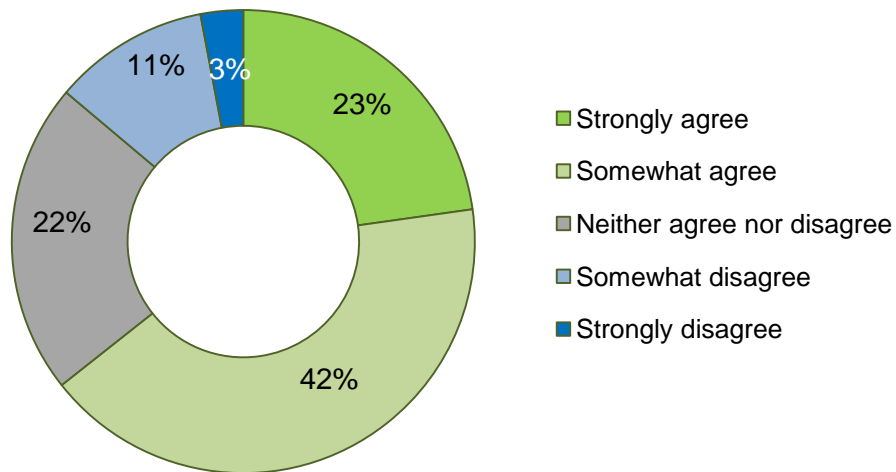


## 4.0 Research and Graduate Studies

This portion of the study presented respondents with two questions designed to measure their attitudes towards the impact of research at academic institutions and of graduate studies on the province of Alberta.

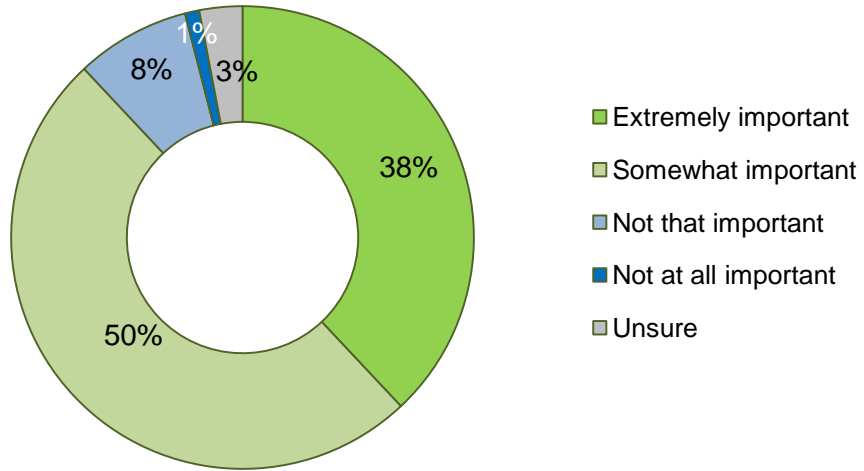
To develop a clearer understanding of what value Albertans place on graduate students (defined to respondents as those pursuing a Masters or Ph.D.) and their impact on the province's future, respondents were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement in figure 4.0 below.

**Figure 4.0: "Graduate students at Alberta's universities are critical to the long term prosperity of the province in developing the knowledge economy of the future" (n=942, weighted)**



Overall, 65% of Albertans either somewhat or strongly agreed that graduate studies are a critical component to future prosperity in the province. A further 22% were not sure, while only 14% disagreed to some extent. While those respondents with graduate degrees were more likely to strongly agree (35%), there were minimal differences across demographic subgroups.

**Figure 4.1: In your view, how important is it for Alberta universities, colleges, and technical institutes to conduct research in addition to teaching students? (n=942, weighted)**



Next, respondents were asked to reflect on the question of research at academic institutions. Above, figure 4.1 highlights that a strong majority (88%) of Albertans felt it was either extremely or somewhat important for such schools to conduct research in addition to teaching students.

Once again, respondents with graduate degrees were more likely to find conducting research extremely important (54%), while minimal differences existed across other demographic subgroups.



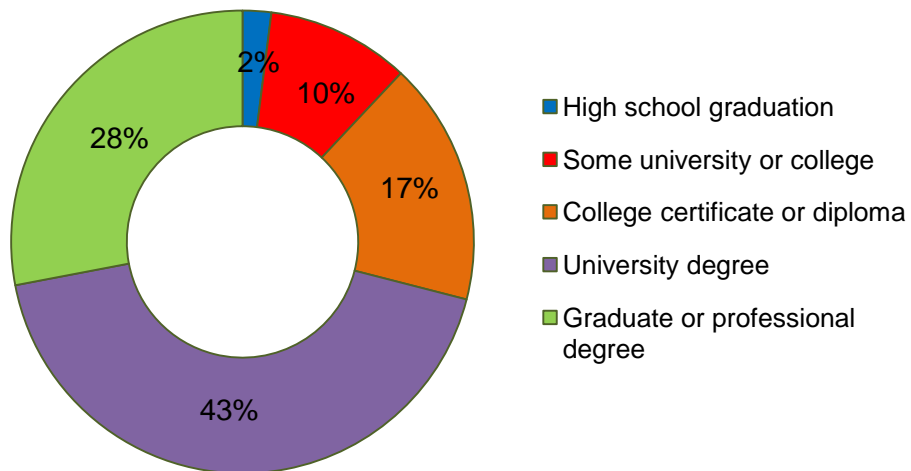
## 5.0 Evaluating Parental views on Post-Secondary

This section was designed to provide an overview of the hopes and worries parents hold for their children’s educational futures. Here, respondents were screened based on their living situation, and only those respondents with children under 18 currently living at home have been included.

### 5.1 Level of Education for Children

When asked what level of education they hope their children will achieve, parents were most likely to choose a university degree (43%), although virtually all parents (98%) hoped their children would get at least some amount of post-secondary education.

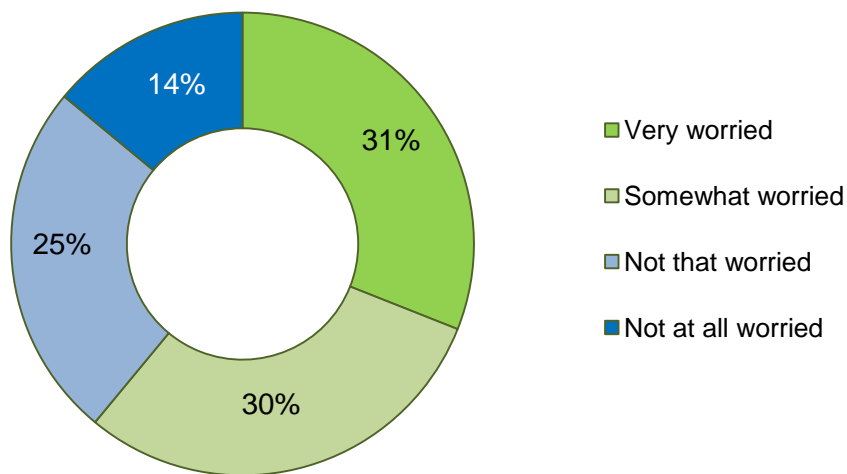
**Figure 5.0: What do you hope will be the highest level of education your youngest child will achieve?**  
(n=243, weighted)



## 5.2 Worries about Affordability

When asked how worried they were about the affordability of post-secondary education, 61% of parents reported being very or somewhat worried. Only 14% of Albertan parents were not at all worried about the affordability of education. Although the sub sample of 243 respondents is not broad enough to completely analyze demographic subgroups, there appeared to be a strong correlation between level of income and worries about affordability.

**Figure 5.1: How worried are you about being able to afford post-secondary education for your youngest child? (n=243, weighted)**



## 6.0 Methodology

The purpose of public opinion research is to measure attitudes and behaviours of a study population within reliable and acceptable statistical margins of accuracy.

### Survey Administration

The survey was conducted online with 943 respondents in English using an internet survey platform licensed by Abacus Data. A random sample of panelists was invited to participate in the survey from a larger internet panel of over 150,000 Canadians.

The survey was completed between April 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, 2012.

Steps were taken to ensure that the survey respondents were representative of the population of Alberta over 18 years of age. Quotas were set to match the distribution of actual census data for age, gender, and education level. Moreover, statistical weighting was applied to the data after the completion of the survey for age, gender, region, education, and past provincial vote.

Respondents were informed of the purpose of the research, that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that all information provided would remain confidential.

### Sample Distribution

A sample of 943 drawn from the population of Alberta would be expected to provide results accurate to within plus or minus 3.2 percent in 95 out of 100 samples. Since a random sample was not generated for this project, there is technically no margin of error. However, the margin of error for this project is comparable to plus or minus 3.2 percent. Readers should be cautious of making conclusions from smaller sub-samples.

<b>Region</b>	<b>Unweighted Count (All Respondents)</b>	<b>Weighted Count (All respondents)</b>
North	59	61
Central (Including Red Deer)	97	137
Edmonton and surrounding municipalities	329	307
Calgary and surrounding municipalities	366	338
South (including Lethbridge and Medicine Hat)	92	98
Total	943	942

## 7.0 About Abacus Data

Abacus Data is a national strategic research firm specializing in marketing and opinion research. Our team of research specialists helps organizations to identify the strategic questions that drive business decisions and design research projects to answer those questions. Our objective is to collect the right data and go deeper in gaining insights into the area of interest.

Research, data collection, and analysis lie along a continuum; each step towards your project is just as critical to its success as the one before. Abacus Data is a full service research and strategy consulting firm whose work is guided by our commitment to our clients, the research process, and looking at things differently.

These values mean that all reports, recommendations, and analyses produced by Abacus Data are supported by rigorously tested data, collected following the highest standards in research methodology. As a full service research firm, we offer clients a full range of research solutions – from surveys to focus groups to panel management and targeted opinion leader research.

For more information about Abacus Data or to see our publicly available research, please visit our website at [www.abacusdata.ca](http://www.abacusdata.ca).

### 7.1 Our Track Record

As only one of three national polling firms to predict the results of the 2011 federal election within its margin of error, Abacus Data has quickly established itself as a trusted research source. Since entering the marketing research industry in July 2010, Abacus Data has developed an impression track record, working with a diverse group of large and small corporations and organizations.

Abacus Data has been the research partner for:

- **A major North American transportation company** conducting public opinion and stakeholder research on topics around public policy development, customer relations, branding, and market opportunities.
- **A provincial emergency responder association** conducting research on message testing and public policy development.
- **A provincial government department** evaluating a pilot program among landowners and hunters.
- **A national aquaculture organization** conducting public opinion research of consumer behaviour, industry reputation, and public policy development.
- **A large post-secondary institution** testing marketing materials for new program design among high school and first-year university students.
- **A provincial energy company** measuring national brand positioning and public attitudes towards public policy proposals.

- **A national media organization** measuring audience satisfaction with programming and content changes.
- **An international sporting organization** measuring market potential among Millennials living in Canada, Britain, and the United States.

## 7.2 David Coletto, Chief Insight Officer

Dr. David Coletto leads Abacus Data's team of research consultants and strategists, delivering strategic advice and research design expertise to some of Canada's leading corporations, advocacy groups, and political leaders.

Earning a PhD from the University of Calgary, Dr. Coletto has over seven years experience working in the marketing research industry. He has conducted research studies for organizations in many sectors including pharmaceutical, transportation, educational, natural resource, telecommunications, media, arts and culture, tourism, and retail. He has also advised elected officials and senior-level decision makers at the federal, provincial, and municipal government levels.

He is an Adjunct Professor at the Arthur Kroeger College of Public Affairs at Carleton University where he teaches courses on research methods, research-based strategy development, and political marketing.

David is also the Pollster for Sun News Network, the official pollster for the Corporate and Community Responsibility Conference at Algonquin College, and a regular columnist with The Hill Times.