

## Access

### **Can you or your child get in?**

Access refers to the ability of individuals to secure a space in the post-secondary education system. While affordability is very much connected to access, we focus here on factors such as academic requirements, competition for space, and physical distance. Evidence is mounting that there are not enough spaces in the system for the number of students who want to get in.

### **The Premier tells Albertans access is a problem**

In his February 8, 2005, television address, Premier Ralph Klein stated, "I've heard too many parents saying, 'My daughter had an 80 per cent average, but she had to leave Alberta because there's no room in our universities and colleges.' I've heard others say, 'My son wants to get a trade, but he has to wait a year to get into an apprenticeship program.' That's simply not acceptable."<sup>14</sup>

### **Academically qualified is a moving target**

In 1987-88, the minimum entrance average necessary for admission for arts and science students at the University of Calgary was 60%. By 2001-02, the minimum entrance requirement had increased to 70%.<sup>15</sup> While the government can claim that there is access for all "qualified" students, the definition of "qualified" changes as the admissions standards are increased leaving more and more would-be students unable to pursue their studies. Is this fair for prospective students?

Just having the minimum required average does not guarantee entrance to the institution of your choice. In September 2004, the average marks for first-year university applicants who were actually admitted to Alberta universities was 83.2%. Nearly 88% of entrants into the system had marks above 75%.<sup>16</sup>

Rising academic entrance requirements are a direct symptom of limited program space – and competition for limited space has become fierce, as the Premier pointed out. Many academically qualified students are being turned away because they cannot find a space in our post-secondary education system.<sup>17</sup> Despite strong demand, institutions have not been able to expand enrolment appreciably because they do not receive enough operating funds from the government. Are we creating a post-secondary education system that only the academic elite will be able to access?

### **What form will new seats take?**

The government announced it will increase post-secondary education access by 15,000 places over the next three years. There is a real concern that institutions will suffer serious operating cost overruns if they are forced to accept significantly more students than the government is willing to fund. The government acknowledges its \$90 million commitment to expand the system's capacity is inadequate and it argues that new places do not necessarily equate to building physical places. There has been a great deal of ambiguity surrounding how the

government defines new places in the system. It may mean the expansion of distance-learning opportunities or the creation of some other kind of “virtual seats.”

While distance learning is already an important tool for post-secondary education delivery in Alberta, it is not a “one size fits all” solution to accommodate qualified applicants to the system.

### **Participation rates**

The government also seeks to improve Alberta’s overall post-secondary education participation rate. Alberta has the lowest university participation rate in the country - 15.8%.<sup>18</sup> The targeted three-year system growth of 15,000 seats (in whatever form those seats take) will be insufficient to meet both current demand pressures and to increase overall participation rates. The government can and must do more.

### **Rural barriers**

Many factors may influence participation rates. For rural Albertans, a big factor is distance. In order to attend post-secondary institutions many rural Albertans must relocate, which may be costly.

When a university and a college are both nearby, students are as likely to attend either type of school. Students who do not live close to a university but who do live where there is a local community college are more likely to choose to attend that local community college. Similarly, those who live beyond a commuting distance from a community college are less likely to pursue any post-secondary education at all.

The evidence would suggest that students are not choosing program paths by interest or aptitude, but are choosing them because some paths have fewer barriers.

---

<sup>14</sup> Klein, Hon. Ralph, Premier, *Alberta’s Celebration of the Century*, Remarks delivered on February 8, 2005

<sup>15</sup> Junor, Sean and Alex Usher, *The Price of Knowledge, Access and Student Finance in Canada*, Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation, 2002, pg 22

<sup>16</sup> Junor, Sean and Alex Usher, *The Price of Knowledge 2004, Access and Student Financial Aid in Canada*, 2004, <http://www.millenniumscholarships.ca/en/research/poksum.asp>, accessed on July 11, 2005

<sup>17</sup> Calgary Economic Development, *Making the Grade: A Preliminary Review of Post-Secondary Education in the Calgary Region*, 2004, page 17

<sup>18</sup> Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta: Profile of Alberta’s Advanced Education System*, June 2005, page 29