

## Quality

### **Who is responsible for ensuring quality?**

Alberta's ballooning fiscal wealth should enable us to build a post-secondary education system that meets international standards for quality while still ensuring an affordable system open to all Albertans. Yet, government policies pay only lip service to these goals. Individual learners have been left with a greater share of the responsibility of paying for quality. The government's position is "affordability mechanisms used to increase access must be balanced with the need to ensure Alberta's adult education system continues to support quality."<sup>19</sup>

The view that a high quality post-secondary education system cannot also be affordable is both reckless and irresponsible. High quality post-secondary education is in the broader public interest. Individual users should not be responsible for maintaining quality through the fees they pay. Imagine for a moment if the quality of healthcare were dependent upon the premiums you pay. What kind of healthcare system would we have? How high would premiums have to be?

If building a high-quality post-secondary education system is a priority for our society, then that goal ought to be backed by the full resolve and commitment of the government – and the government alone. Institutions should not be forced to turn to corporations and user fees to sustain quality. It is government that is responsible for the quality of the system.

### **Is quality in decline?**

The government looks at several measures to assess quality in our post-secondary education system. However, it is arguable whether these measures are adequate. This is because the government's quality assessment tools tend to be somewhat superficial. They include such measures as completion rates, graduate employment rates, and graduate satisfaction.

While the government's assessment tools are important, other aspects of the system are more central to the measurement of quality such as: level of meaningful interaction between student and instructor, high quality faculty, low student instructor ratios, full selection of program offerings, comprehensiveness of library holdings, age and relevance of equipment, sufficient computer access for staff and students, appropriate distribution of state of the art infrastructure, frequency of study spaces, and appropriate distribution of common spaces for peer/instructor interaction on campus.

Adequate levels of experienced support staff are also an important factor relating to quality. The smooth functioning of the system is often dependent on the staff who are involved in all aspects of the operation of post-secondary institutions. These include student services staff, technicians, and computer specialists.

### **Strikes against quality**

Government funding cuts have had an impact on quality. Institutions have been forced to cut costs at every corner and quality has suffered.

Class sizes are increasing; between 1992 and 2002, university student to full-time faculty ratio in Alberta increased from 17.2 to 21.8.<sup>20</sup> Class size can be as high as 500 students. Instructors can experience difficulties grading hundreds of students and are often forced to turn to multiple choice testing rather than use more meaningful assessment tools like essay examinations. Imagine trying to access your instructor for extra help or guidance in such conditions.

The amount of time instructors are able to provide to their students is further reduced as more and more administrative tasks are offloaded to instructors. The number of support staff has been significantly reduced leaving the burden of necessary administrative tasks to other (strained) support staff and to faculty to pick up.

Budget constraints at the institution are downloaded to individual departments to deal with. As a result, course offerings are reduced and some programs have been cut altogether. Many individual courses are offered on two or three-year cycles, meaning, in some cases, that students are adjusting their graduation timelines waiting for a required course to cycle into active rotation so they can enrol and satisfy the program requirement.

### **What is the state of quality?**

Quality is in decline largely as the result of government's failing to provide the funding necessary to operate the post-secondary education system. The system is not moving forward with innovation and as high a quality as it could. Instead, it struggles to maintain current operations while the government wishes to impose ever wider system objectives without providing the necessary funds.

High quality academic staff will be a very scarce resource throughout North America in the coming years. A huge bulge in retirements will coincide with an increase in student numbers to produce pressures that are already evident today. Is the government ready to take steps today to make work conditions for academic staff more attractive and competitive so Alberta can retain and recruit more of Canada's best and brightest? If not, we can expect our trained academic staff to seek positions out of province or out of country because better working conditions are to be found elsewhere. Institutions have found it cheaper to hire sessional instructors, but this is at best a short-term response to a long-term question that only adequate funding can resolve.

The post-secondary education system also suffers from a systemic problem known as deferred maintenance. This means that institutions coping with funding constraints are deferring much needed maintenance of existing buildings and facilities in favour of investing scarce resources in current operations.

Deferred maintenance is a problem in Alberta on a grand scale; estimates of deferred maintenance at our various post-secondary education institutions currently run as high as \$950 million. According to Alberta Infrastructure, only 45% of our post-secondary education institutions are in “good condition.”<sup>21</sup> Aging facilities are rotting and the government has yet to act.

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<sup>19</sup> Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta: Ensuring Affordability in Alberta’s Advanced Education System*, June 2005, page 14

<sup>20</sup> Alberta Advanced Education, *A Learning Alberta: Ensuring Affordability in Alberta’s Advanced Education System*, June 2005, page 14

<sup>21</sup> Alberta Infrastructure Business Plan, 2005 – 2008, page 321