

Post-Secondary Education Report Card

WHY DID PUBLIC INTEREST ALBERTA LAUNCH ITS PUBLIC CONSULTATION PROCESS?

Post-secondary education is widely acknowledged as being crucial to Alberta's future. At the same time, there are strong feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction with the current state of post-secondary education in the province, and a sense that important issues must be addressed if we are to have the type of system that we need and desire.

When the Government of Alberta announced that post-secondary education was to become a top priority, hopes were raised that there would be significant opportunities to have the necessary discussions and debates on the wide range of issues facing us.

However, the government then announced a consultation and review process that was a major disappointment. The review committee failed to include some key interests and voices. The process consisted of a limited online survey, supplemented by invitation-only private consultations and a conference. Opportunities for discussion and debate were extremely limited. Overall, the government's review process was too narrow, too limited, too exclusive and far too private.

PIA'S CONSULTATION PROCESS

Public Interest Alberta decided to offer a consultation process that was both more public and more inclusive, and that offered genuine opportunities for open discussion and debate. The process was centred on eight public hearings in regions around the province, held between September 28 and October 14 in cooperation with student, faculty and other employee organizations in Alberta's universities, colleges and technical institutes.

In addition, PIA and its partners produced and distributed widely an eight-page background paper, *Post-Secondary Education Reality Check*:

Take a Look, You Decide. Respondents were invited to grade the government's approach to post-secondary education in four key areas: *funding, access, affordability and quality.* They were also asked to identify key areas of concern and to suggest directions or solutions. Submissions were accepted online and by mail.

The eight regional public hearings involved presentations by over 150 individuals – students, instructors, administrators, representatives of organizations, parents, grandparents and interested citizens. Attendance ranged from approximately 25 to 70, participants were free to discuss what they wished, and seven sessions were attended by at least two MLAs.

Responses to the *Reality Check Report Card* were received from 237 individuals, with a total of 84 from Edmonton and Calgary and the remainder from 31 other locations across the province.

WHAT WE HEARD

The following report summarizes the information from the hearings and the *Reality Check* in several ways. For each of the four initial topics (funding, access, affordability and quality) there is a summary of all of the various issues and concerns raised, as well as a summary of the wide range of suggested directions. In addition, since further issues and concerns emerged during the consultations, there is a summary of "Emerging and underlying issues, concerns and suggested directions." Finally, there is a selection of highlights from presentations at each of the eight forums, as well as graphs and excerpts from the *Reality Check*. All of the input from eight forums and the on-line suggestions has been compiled and sent to Minister Hancock's office and is available on our website.

Participants brought forward a wide range of concerns and suggestions and, not surprisingly, there are disagreements and contradictions among them. However, there are also areas of agreement that become evident.

One of the things that quickly emerged in the hearings was the passion and commitment of so many people with regard to post-secondary education. The issues mattered a great deal to them as individuals, but there was also a strong sense of an over-riding societal interest, and of the importance of “getting it right” in post-secondary education.

It was also clear that across the province there is an enormous sense of frustration and concern with a wide range of post-secondary issues and with the government’s failure to adequately address those concerns. The frustration was compounded by the sharp contrast between the

government’s rhetoric about the vital importance of post-secondary education to our individual and collective futures versus the realities of large student debt, lack of access, inadequate loans, rapidly-growing tuition fees and other expenses, crowded classrooms, deteriorating infrastructure and many other concerns. There was a widespread view that the government has failed to address key issues in the past, and that it lacks a vision and commitment for the future.

The majority of those who responded to the *Reality Check Report Card* gave the government a failing grade on its efforts in each of the four key areas. The harshest judgments were made in the areas of affordability, where 81% gave the government a failing grade, and funding, where the figure was 78%.

It is also important to note that the tone of the presentations and submissions was not one of whining or complaining. Rather, we heard from articulate and concerned students who value post-secondary education and are distressed that so many unnecessary barriers and roadblocks are put in their way - as one student said, “it shouldn’t be this difficult to get an education.” We also heard from faculty members who are fully committed to providing a high quality education, but are too often being denied the support and the tools necessary to do so.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

We have presented this range of views and insights for the purpose of fostering a more informed debate on these vital issues of public policy, particularly in the light of the government’s inadequate approach to consultation and engagement. We hope the government and the committee charged with reviewing the system will recognize the many serious concerns and challenges raised in this document and will put in place real and lasting solutions.

Public Interest Alberta has an ongoing Task Force on Post-Secondary Education, and we are committed to playing a continuing role in engaging citizens in discussion of these issues. PIA will be hosting a provincial public conference on post secondary education on January 20-22 in Edmonton.

