Mark Norris

Mark Norris wasn’t a member of the legislature when the government passed Bill 46, but he says that the bill should be repealed to give students better assurances about tuition.

“I would like to evolve tuition back into legislation. I think it’s important that government officials have a say in what’s going on,” Norris says.

Still, Norris believes that the former tuition policy, which allowed postsecondary institutions to increase tuition by up to 30 per cent of their operating budgets, was not effective, and ten to 15 per cent would be a better goal.

“A well-educated work force is obviously more healthy, more productive,” Norris says. “I think when we allowed the universities and colleges to go up to 30 per cent—and they all did—that really hampered the affordability of postsecondary education.”

He explains that the recent debate between the equal distribution of new student spaces between Lethbridge and Calgary is a moot point.

“I don’t think they ever will be presented equally. I think that was a red herring from the get-go,” he says.

Norris points to the fact that the University of Alberta has historically been larger, providing a greater diversity of programs than the University of Calgary, and went on to say that institutions in the province should be given spaces based on demand rather than focusing on a balanced distribution.

“It’s not logical to a government to say one size fits all,” Norris says.

Norris suggests that Athabasca University and the use of the SuperNet makes long-distance learning available to students in rural communities, which are often prone to deep cuts when moving to the city to attend university.

However, Norris cautioned that the trend to give college degree-granting status—Grant MacEwan began last year and Mount Royal is moving in that direction—may cause problems.

“I think we have to tread very carefully because I know from some research that some of the degrees that are proposed and coming out of Grant MacEwan aren’t going to be recognized,” Norris says. “I would hate for Alberta students to go down a path and think they’re going to get a Bachelor of Arts degree that won’t be recognized.”

He went on to say that postsecondary education isn’t a cost pressure, but an investment that would ultimately benefit Albertans.

Once we get people understanding that the whole of society benefits by a greater, healthier postsecondary education system, I think we’re better off,” Norris adds.

VICTOR DOERKSEN

Certified General Accountant

Victor Doerksen, MLA for Red Deer-South, is a supporter of distance education, and hopes to expand upon the existing programs and resources to create more spaces for students.

“It’s a way to create spaces without having to necessarily create physical spaces,” he says.

He explains that expanding upon partnerships between institutions across the province can give students greater access to the postsecondary system.

The ongoing tuition debate has students demanding more funding from government, but Doerksen says of the mind that students should be contributing about 30 per cent of the cost—five percentage points above the current rate of affairs—leaving the rest to the government and taxpayers.

“I think that it’s quite appropriate for students to bear a portion of their education. It’s a shared responsibility between students and other taxpayers,” Doerksen says.

Doerksen says that the greatest cost burden to rural students in particular isn’t tuition costs, but that they have to leave home and find accommodations in the city.

“The way to address that really is to look at the current limits we put around the student finance or the student loans to make sure we have the appropriate room and board figures there in terms of what the actual cost is when they’re making an application,” Doerksen notes.

He goes on to say that barriers to the student finance system often affect students from middle-income homes.

“Parents are expected to contribute a certain amount for their kid’s education. I think that needs to be reviewed as well because I think for kids from middle-income homes, that’s providing a bit of a barrier,” Doerksen says.

Doerksen voted in favour of Bill 46 and says that having tuition out of legislation isn’t a matter of concern to students.

“I think that through regulation you can actually make it more responsive to the particular needs of the time,” Doerksen says. “I would certainly engage student leaders from all the institutions in any changes that would be made to the regulation.”

GARY MCPHERSON

Honorary Doctor of Laws (U of A)
Order of Canada

Though Gary McPherson has never been an elected member of the Legislature, he served as an appointed member of government as chairman of the Premiers’ Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities. McPherson, who commented polio when he was nine years old, is now a presence on the U of A campus, drawing on his life experience to give lectures in a plethora of courses and providing an advisory role in the Faculty of Physical Education & Recreation.

McPherson says that making postsecondary more affordable takes a political commitment.

“Words are one thing, but action is another, and I recognize as well as most that tuition challenges for students and the crippling debt that they come out of university and colleges with is really unacceptable. You can’t get started in life when you’re under a mountaintop of debt,” McPherson says.

He suggests creating a personal education savings plan, which would give young people who decide to work instead of pursuing postsecondary studies the incentive to return to school.

McPherson says that by using technology, the government is reaching students across the province, with projects like the Law Hole digital library and the SuperNet.

“[Technology is important],” McPherson says, adding that the government should invest more money into new technologies.

He goes on to say that improving student spaces in urban centres comes with the additional challenge that it draws students away from their communities, which increases their cost of living.

“Just because you have more physical space doesn’t necessarily make it that much better because students will have to be there and that costs money to be there,” he says.

Again, McPherson points to technology as a means to improve the delivery of education.

“We have to look at every way that we can open up more spaces, and distance [educational] does allow us to reach more people. It also allows you to take the quality of faculty and bring it to the students, as opposed to any faculty member,” McPherson says. “We have to be very creative about how we do that. People’s time is very precious [and] we have to allow education to be flexible in real time so that we can allow people to other things as well.”