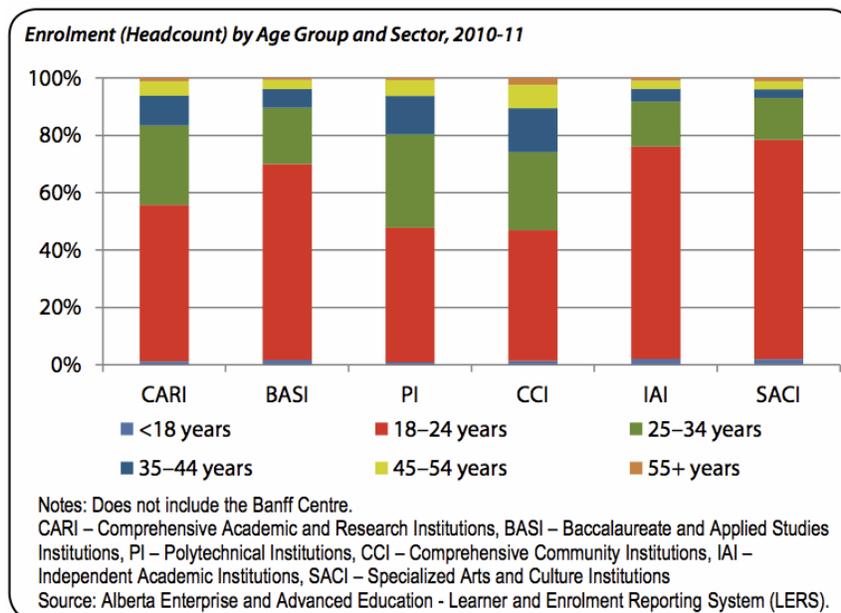


Recent changes to the Student Aid Alberta funding system that were designed to reduce financial barriers and improve access to post-secondary education in Alberta did not address the myriad of financial barriers faced by married and common-law students.

While Student Aid Alberta no longer presumes parental support for younger/dependent students, it continues to presume a burdensome level of spousal support for married or common-law students wishing to attend post-secondary and does not recognize the higher costs faced by married and common-law students. This creates assessment protocols that lead to inequitable access to Alberta's post-secondary system based solely on marital status.

Our student demographic is changing. Almost 42% of post-secondary students do not transition directly from high school, preferring instead to take a break of two years or more before entering the post-secondary system. As shown in Graph 1, our post-secondary student population is not the traditionally thought of 18-22 year old age group, but rather has a significant number of students aged 25+ years, making them more likely to be married or common-law and subject to inequitable assessment practices and subsequent inequitable access.

Graph 1: Enrolment (headcount) by Age Group and Sector, 2010-11. From Campus Alberta Planning Resource.



This inequitable access will also have implications for Alberta's post-secondary participation rates, which have remained stagnant at around 20% for the last decade, and

impact our future as a knowledge-driven economy. Married and common-law students are more likely to have children and recent research conducted by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) has shown that parental educational attainment is a better predictor of post-secondary participation of their children than family income. Students with at least 1 parent with a post-secondary education are 40% more likely to attend post-secondary than their peers with parents who have earned high-school diplomas or less.

Strengthening access to post-secondary for those who did not transition from high school would help address skill shortages and improve quality of life for those Albertans. To ensure equitable access to post-secondary education by all Albertans and to promote Alberta's goal of a knowledge-driven future, ASAPA presents the following recommendations for consideration:

- The income exemption on spousal earnings could be increased.
- Spousal contribution could be assessed as a flat-rate contribution, similar to the way students are assessed a flat-rate contribution.
- Spousal income could be exempt in the provincial need calculation.
- The married student living allowance could be increased to be more reflective of actual costs.
- Married students could be given a higher yearly and lifetime loan maximum to account for higher costs that married students face.
- Maintenance Grant could be automatically assessed for married students with dependents under the age of 12 years.

We fully support Enterprise and Advanced Education's mission for Student Aid Alberta:

*Student Aid Alberta invests in Albertans; it provides funding and reduces financial barriers to a post-secondary education so Albertans can fully contribute to their families, communities and a knowledge-driven future.*

Allowing for equitable assessment of married students is another way to encourage a knowledge-driven future and ensure the continued success of the "Alberta Advantage."