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TOO MANY CANADIAN KIDS ARE GOING TO UNIVERSITY: KEN COATES IN THE POST

Writing in [the National Post](#), Macdonald-Laurier Institute Senior Fellow Ken Coates says Canada's post-secondary education system is pushing too many kids who don't have the necessary skills towards university education.

Coates participated in MLI's [second Great Canadian Debate of 2015](#), in which he argued in favour of the motion: "Too many Canadian kids are going to university". Former University of Winnipeg President Lloyd Axworthy [argued against](#).



By Ken Coates, April 29, 2015

Are there too many Canadian young people at university? I think the question is a fair one, but you would not think so from the reaction to the issue being raised. A report I prepared for the Canadian Council of Chief Executives, Career Ready, attracted way more attention for the suggestion that we could do with 30% fewer university students than at present, than for all of the other ideas and suggestions combined.

The debate is a crucial one for a variety of reasons. University education is expensive, both for the governments that fund undergraduate and graduate education and student financial aid, and for the individuals and families who cope with ever-rising tuition fees and related costs. It is fair to ask if the money is well spent. Given that the vast majority of students (supported by their parents) attending university do so because of their aspirations for a decent career and income, it is also legitimate to ask if the system is adequately preparing young adults for the contemporary workforce. (Spoiler alert: the answer is that, yes, there are jobs for graduates but that many positions offer low wages, temporary work and not the career track that young Canadians anticipated.)

There are other reasons to ask the question. Even the strongest advocates of a university education — and I am one of those — are worried about the state of undergraduate education

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needed for academic success. Conversely, I do not favour encouraging students to attend university if they lack these traits. Doing well at university is difficult. It requires real grit and determination and an advanced level of skill. Pretending otherwise diminishes the degree or, even worse, forces institutions into watering down the quality of the education provided to keep students in their programs.

I worry when I hear it suggested that universities should be more open and that we should be encouraging even more people to attend. Heading off to university ill-prepared and without the right level of commitment is a recipe for an early “Dean’s vacation” from one’s studies. That well over 20 per cent of students who start university do not graduate in a reasonable amount of time is an indication to me that we have too many undergraduates. At some Canadian institutions, more than half of those who start a degree do not graduate. I always wonder why so little attention is given to the personal impact of failure on the many students who are forced to abandon their studies for academic reasons.

Clearly — and unsurprisingly — some young people have the ability to succeed and others do not. Intellectual ability is not evenly distributed across the population, any more than is athletic, musical, technical or artistic capabilities.

Watching, year after year, students with subpar writing and study skills enter the academy is painful in the extreme. University is not supposed to be the site for remedial education, yet the demand for such programs continues to grow. We do not live in Garrison Keeler’s Lake Wobegon, where everyone is above average.

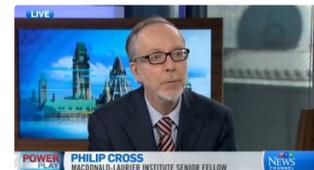
Universities are clearly and demonstrably elitist in many aspects of their work. We exercise rigid controls over key professional programs — medicine, law, accounting, pharmacy, engineering — and demand that entering students demonstrate their ability to succeed before they are admitted to their studies. There is no real reason why we could not exercise this selection earlier in the education process. Allowing students who are ill-prepared for a university education into our institutions weakens the experience for the stronger students and for faculty members, many of whom resent the expectation that they will have to work on developing basic skills among ill-prepared students.

There are a couple of major caveats that need to be entered. We need to direct more support to students without the financial means to capitalize on the current system. Equally, we need to continue efforts to support key unrepresented groups, particularly students with disabilities and aboriginal people.

Much as universities, quite appropriately, see themselves as bastions of free and open inquiry, critical thinking and citizen development, the reality is that the public and the students are focused on careers. To that end, we need far better discussion in this country about matching

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debates and profound engagement that we all want Canadian university students to experience. We do have too many students or, more accurately, too many of the wrong students, in our universities at present.

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