

Money won't fix what's wrong with post-secondary education

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Ilona Dougherty



Picture it — a group of young people hurriedly making their way to Parliament Hill to meet with MPs and senators. Maybe it sounds unlikely, [but it happened earlier this month](#), when student lobbyists had nearly 200 meetings with decision-makers to argue their case for accessible post-secondary education.

The Trudeau government says it's focused on the promise of innovation and human potential. Universities are a key part of the conversation — but would the Canadian Federation of Students' idea of free tuition make Canada more innovative?

We've all seen the statistics: Tuition fees are going up, along with youth unemployment and underemployment. At the same time, Canada's system of higher education and training has slid in OECD rankings from 9th in 2008 to 19th in 2015-2016. Any system that becomes costlier even as it accomplishes less is headed in the wrong direction.

Given the sluggish economy and the government's long list of campaign promises, the Canadian Federation of Students doubtless knew their pitch for \$1.8 billion in new money, and another \$1.5 billion in reallocated money, to make tuition free at Canadian universities [wasn't going anywhere this spring](#). The Liberal government has promised already to spend \$750 million to increase non-repayable student grants, and to waive loan repayments until a

graduate earns at least \$25,000 a year. But if Canada wants to put innovation and ideas at the centre of the economy in the long-run, then these students are at least starting a conversation we sorely need to have.

Free tuition is a bold idea — maybe not bold enough. If we want to think about what's missing in our post secondary education system, we need to start by understanding how the knowledge economy works.

If the problem is too many young people with degrees chasing jobs that don't exist, and a post-secondary education system that isn't built to train young people for the jobs that will exist in the future, than why double-down on a model that doesn't work?

In his book *Creating Innovators: The Making of Young People Who Will Change the World*, education expert Tony Wagner argues that our Western education model can no longer keep up with the world around us. "Increasingly in the twenty-first century," he writes, "what you know is far less important than what you can *do* with what you know." Education, in other words, ought to be less about cramming facts into young minds and more about ensuring young people have the opportunities to experiment with and apply what they learn — an interplay between learning and action.

In his book *Teen 2.0*, psychologist Robert Epstein argues that "education needs to be spread out over one's life, not compacted into the childhood and (young adult) years." The knowledge economy moves too fast for a conventional education; what we learn in first year university might be largely irrelevant by the time we graduate. An education system than that isn't focused on life-long learning may not allow us to learn what we need to know when we need to know it.

Economist Benjamin Jones talks about a "[knowledge burden](#)": When we know too much about a given field, he argues, it can diminish the likelihood of disruptive innovation. Sometimes, success in innovation goes to those who know *less* but are able to imagine solutions to problems that seem insoluble to most.

What does it mean to learn effectively in an innovation economy? Is shunting more young people through a system that is not broadly equipped to produce innovators (something which free tuition would only accelerate) really an effective solution to our innovation deficit?

According to the Canadian Federation of Students' own report, "the Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates that as of 2014, roughly 40 per cent of Canadians aged 25-34 with a university degree are overqualified for their current position." If the problem is too many young people with degrees chasing jobs that don't exist, and a post-secondary education system that isn't built to train young people for the jobs that will exist in the future, than why double-down on a model that doesn't work?

The federal government has gone out of its way to recognize universities as central to any national innovation agenda. Prime Minister Trudeau goes to Davos to highlight the successes of the University of Waterloo. Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development Navdeep Bains talks of "new ideas emerging from Canadian universities" as being key to innovation. We get it — universities and innovation go hand in hand.

But perhaps before we commit to big policy changes at the federal level in an area generally handled by the provinces, we need to take a step back.

Yes, we need to listen to young people when they say they're struggling, when they ask us to engage on the issues that matter to them. But we can't address the problems young people are facing today without also building a post-secondary education system worthy of the future.

Ilona Dougherty is a youth engagement expert and the co-founder of [Apathy is Boring](#). She is a regular commentator in national media, a published author, and speaks to audiences internationally about how we can tap into the innovation potential of Millennials and Gen Z. She was named one of the Top 100 Most Powerful Women in Canada by the Women's Executive Network in 2015.



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