

Comment by David Trick on “Ontario doesn’t need three new campuses” by George Fallis

Professor George Fallis says (see [March 5, 2012 Toronto Star](#) column below) that Ontario does not need to expand its higher education system, because in the future only 70 percent of jobs will require a postsecondary education.

But only about 60 percent of Ontario’s young people complete a university or college program that is at least two years long. Others start university or college but do not complete a diploma or degree. We can’t improve completion rates unless we make more space for students.

We also need to make room for postsecondary graduates who want to improve their education in a changing economy. There should be room in the higher education system for the college graduate who wants to complete a baccalaureate degree, or the laid-off worker who wants to start a second career in a new field.

The number of 18-year-olds in Ontario has been falling since 2008, yet the number of applicants to university and college has risen every year. Six years from now the number of 18-year-olds will start to grow again. Anyone who wants to make enough spaces for students needs to look at the longer term.

Higher education offers no guarantees, but—more than any other public policy—it offers the potential of a better job and a more secure career as well as the personal enrichment that comes with greater education.

Professor Fallis is right that we should pay more attention to whether we are providing higher education well and whether students are learning what they need to learn. But this goal should not be achieved by turning away qualified students who want to attend university or college.

“Ontario doesn’t need three new campuses” by George Fallis

Toronto Star, March 5, 2012

Ontario has plans to expand the higher education system by 60,000 places through three new campuses.

This is on top of the large expansion of the last decade. University enrolments have grown by 50 per cent and college enrolments by 23 per cent. This expansion has been to accommodate the baby boom echo, immigration and rising participation rates.

Few realize the magnitude of this expansion: It is larger in absolute terms than the Bill Davis expansion for the baby boom!

We need to pause, recognize and celebrate this accomplishment. Ontario has made an extraordinary commitment to higher education over the last decade.

Contrary to what many believe, the growth in health spending over this period has not squeezed out spending on higher education. They have both grown at about the same rate. Ontario has one of the best systems of higher education in the world, highlighted by its achievements in providing access to higher education.

But do we need to expand even more? The answer is no. And, indeed, to expand now will weaken the existing institutions as they will soon struggle to hold their enrolments.

The baby boom echo has reached its peak and is about to decline. The 18- to 21-year-old group in Ontario is forecast to decline 8.6 per cent over the next decade. This forecast assumes high immigration levels, but given Ontario's economic problems, the level of immigration will likely fall below forecast.

Rising participation rates cannot possibly overcome this decline in the eligible demographic group enough to require expansion. Data from Statistics Canada's Youth in Transition survey show that by the time Ontarians reach the age of 21, 75 per cent have entered either university or college. The participation rate cannot go much higher, given the diversity of aptitudes, interests and aspirations of the age group.

And it would be problematic if we expanded the system to allow the participation rate to go higher because the demand side of the labour market will not require even 70 per cent with a university degree or college diploma. If we expand the higher education system now, we risk producing some very disappointed graduates.

We must now confront a paradox for the first time in Ontario. It remains the best advice to any young person: Get a higher education. But, for the province as a whole, the best advice is: Do not expand the system.

Over the postwar period, the focus of Ontario's higher education policy has been to expand the system. We have now achieved our goal, moving from elite, to mass, to universal higher education.

Now that we have a system that is big enough, what should be the priorities?

Many students who enter higher education do not complete their program. In the future, attention should shift from questions of access to questions of persistence and completion.

Rather than expanding, we should ask whether we have the right types of degree programs and diplomas to meet the needs of our diverse students.

Our universities and our colleges tend to be quite similar to each other. We need to ask whether the existing range of institutions is differentiated enough to effectively deliver the required wide range of programs and activities.

Much more attention should be devoted to whether we are providing this higher education well, whether we are achieving the learning outcomes desired.

And perhaps in all this, there is a benefit for Ontario.

The current plan is to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to expand the system, continuing the very rapid annual growth of spending on higher education. We could forego this expenditure growth; give the higher education institutions multi-year commitments and let the government grants per student rise at the rate of inflation. There will still be room for targeted initiatives to improve higher education.

Even Don Drummond would be pleased.

George Fallis is University Professor at York University and is writing a book titled Rethinking Higher Education: Participation, Research, and Differentiation.