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Matejko: Excellence or nothing

continued from page 3

on the other hand, by putting much more emphasis on quality rather than quantity and by being more selective than we are now, we are able to achieve much in terms of excellence.

But will the excellence be able to find us jobs?

Definitely. That is exactly the problem. I think only excellent education is worth something. Mediocre training, learning doesn't give any satisfaction, doesn't inspire people to find any sense or meaning in their lives, and floods the labour market with dissatisfied, unskilled and overambitious people who look for money and power without any justification for it. They are just job hunters who really don't deserve it.

So you agree then with the Great Brain Robbery that what universities are doing now is letting everybody in and passing everybody, therefore lowering the level of education?

I think we should make a clear distinction between the community colleges, which are much cheaper and much more practically oriented, and I'm sure there are a number of people who would make a much bigger deal focusing on community colleges than on university. On the other hand of course, if we want to have enough students and to give everybody a chance it is important for the government to offer grants to students.

But of course I don't think the university education is an absolute right for everybody. I don't think we should focus so much on quantity, trying to accommodate everybody including people who don't appreciate quality learning and who are not ready for it.

That is why I have such great esteem for the Cambridge and Oxford tutorial system. When you have direct and very good guidance of students already in their first or second year the tutor becomes quite aware what is the potential of a given student and it is up to the tutor or another counsellor to redirect the student who may gain potentially much more from another type of education. And of course, this must be based on trust in the qualities of teachers and what I think is disastrous for a university is hard bargaining between teachers and students for higher grades. I am personally ashamed when students come to my office and insist very hard for high grades. I am under pressure and it is something that is very unpleasant for me.

One point The Great Brain Robbery makes, not only about students but about professors is their inability to write.

Yes it is related to the problem I meet very often. I am surprised how few students watch intellectual programs on T.V. How few students read good journals and magazines.

But what most students read are textbooks written by professors. And the professors themselves don't write well at all, according to the authors of the Great Brain Robbery.

That is true, that is something we should take very seriously. And I am also guilty, like others, in our use of jargon. I agree with you entirely that we should make a very serious effort in social sciences to get rid of the junk. As professors we learn the jargon, we use it all the time among ourselves. We don't have enough of interdisciplinary studies. We remain in our small kingdoms: sociology,

history, political science, and we don't have enough communication and cross fertilization through the disciplines. You can overcome the jargon when you are in constant touch with your colleagues in other disciplines.

And so what do you think of interdisciplinary studies such as Canadian Studies which are criticized in the Great Brain Robbery as being academically unfounded and weak?

You know that's the problem with our market society, that quite often when new programs are entered, the concern is not so much for the quality than the superficial success of a given program. Then we multiply mediocre things under the name of something that becomes fashionable. The intent of the authors, I think, was just to make people aware of potential danger.

Do you have any other comments to make before we close?

I am not far, in a few years, from retirement, and I in my experience of 15 years have been proud of being a Canadian professor and I am very thankful to the university and to my colleagues and to Canada in general for this opportunity which is related to the free society. At the same time, I feel it is my duty to recognize the challenge that we have and gravity of problems that we face in order not to waste the taxpayer's money and in order to give justice for the great task, to the great duty which we are fulfilling, as people who are provided with resources to train the younger generation of Canada.

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