



New post-secondary system could 'revolutionize the North'

By [Emma Meldrum](#)

Wednesday, November 15, 2017 3:52:25 EST PM



Dr. Ken Coates speaks to a group on Wednesday at Cedar Meadows Resort & Spa. Coates undertook a study with the Northern Policy Institute and found that a stand-alone university might not be the best option for expanding post-secondary studies in Timmins.

TIMMINS - A 57-page report makes the case that a standalone university might not be the best option for Timmins – but expanding post-secondary access in a unique way could “revolutionize the North.”

That's according to Dr. Ken Coates, who researched and wrote 'A University for Timmins?' in partnership with the Northern Policy Institute.

He said a case for a stand-alone university in this city wasn't “compelling” but other options were available.

The report offered these suggestions:

1. Developing a stand-alone university would bring financial and sustainability risks, given demographics, financial realities of government and the availability of other institutions.
2. Developing a satellite campus of an existing university was described as “not entirely compelling” but would limit administrative costs and allow for the institution's rapid establishment.
3. Developing an expanded, coordinated Northern College-university partnership, which would capitalize on the mix of regional programs.
4. Considering alternatives to traditional programming, such as an Indigenous institution, or a work-focused institution that would connect students with employers directly after high school or during university admittance.

Coates said offering something different to the province would make it hard for the government to say no.

“I think you need to give them something that says, we're going to do something here that's unique, that maybe the rest of the province might actually learn from,” he said, noting it could create the opportunity for businesses to hire people with the right skills who are trained in the North and willing to stay there.

“If you do this well, it's a huge gift to Ontario,” said Coates.

“You could revolutionize the North and show a level of leadership, that – I'll put it bluntly – the south doesn't expect.”

The institution Coates had in mind would look at the local economy first.

“The system has to be far more creative and far more responsive than it has been to date, particularly at the university level. There are opportunities for innovation, there are opportunities for collaboration.

You need to build a post-secondary system in this region and in this community that actually is designed for Timmins and Northeastern Ontario. It has to meet the needs of the people, it has to meet the needs of the business community, it has to be committed to growing the economy here in Northeastern Ontario.

“What's the economy, how do we want to build it, what do we need and how does the post-secondary system fit into that?”

Coates explained the context around post-secondary learning in this province during a discussion held at Cedar Meadows Resort & Spa on Wednesday.

Coates is Canada Research Chair in Regional Innovation at the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy, University of Saskatchewan campus. He has conducted external reviews for post-secondary institutions and has written extensively on Indigenous history.

He said it's an expensive operation to open a new university, something the provincial government is growing more cautious about. Other universities already exist in Northern Ontario, making the proposal for a new one less likely to succeed.

Then there's the issue of population.

"The population in the North is not growing. The population of high school graduates is actually declining in most parts of Northern Ontario. That's just a simple reality. Compare that to what's going on down south, particularly in areas where you have an immigrant population and a lot of growth in urban areas, where the numbers of high school graduates are growing dramatically," he said.

The report cited enrolment rates at Timmins high schools, where the biggest schools – École secondaire catholique Thériault and Timmins High and Vocational School – have seen a drop of 138 and 171 students respectively since 2006-2007.

Timmins Economic Development Corporation (TEDC) requested the report, asking the Northern Policy Institute whether the city and region could support an English-language university.

Mayor Steve Black spoke at Wednesday's event, stating that city council appreciates the efforts of the TEDC.

"I think if you go back to the Northern Growth Plan that was developed by the Ontario government, it clearly identifies the critical importance of access to post-secondary education," said Black.

The report made note of Black's previous comments:

"There are few communities in Canada of over 40,000 people without a degree-granting institution within three and a half hours' travel."

The report assessed the city locally and regionally, assessing the institutions already in place, the post-secondary system as a whole and the politics of the system's expansion.

Coates closed his presentation by answering questions about next steps – he recommended that the TEDC team form partnerships with local organizations before approaching the provincial government.