

ENROLMENT BOOM THREATENS

ACCESSIBILITY AND QUALITY

Yesterday the issue of constantly rising tuition fees having no apparent effect on overall increases in Maritime university was briefly mentioned. Indeed, this is a national phenomenon.

In the fall of 2002, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada predicted that, by the year 2011, Canada's universities would experience enrolment increases of up to 30 per cent. This meant that the number of students in Canada's universities would have to increase by 200,000 in only nine years, and the prediction was met with considerable skepticism.

However, recent developments have indicated that this estimate may have been conservative, to say the least.

In only the first two academic years of the period (2002-2003 and 2004-2005) there have been, according to the AUCC, the "largest year-over-year enrolment increases ever seen in Canada". During that time, more than 100,000 new full-time students have entered the system, and we are already halfway towards the total projected increase.

In only the last three years, in fact, the growth in university enrolments in Canada has been more than ten times the growth in the country's total population.

There are several demographic factors which might explain this situation.

One is the anticipated increase of over 8 per cent in 18 to 21-year-olds caused by the "echo boom" generation - that is, the children of the "baby-boomers" - which alone is expected to raise by 35,000 the demand for university places by 2011.

Another is participation rates, which continue to increase exponentially and which, again according to the AUCC, "are by far the biggest factor" in university enrolment growth.

Statistics Canada figures demonstrate that high school dropout rates had fallen from 18 per cent in 1991 to 12 per cent in 1999, and that two-thirds of all high school graduates had expressed the wish to obtain a university degree. The AUCC points out that, even if

only half of them did so, university enrolment growth would be "considerably stronger" even than they had predicted in 2002.

Yet another factor is parental influence. Of all Canadian adults aged between 45 and 54 - the age bracket of most of the parents of the "echo boom" - 19 per cent held university degrees, whereas only six per cent of their own parents had been educated to that level. In only a generation, then, there has been a threefold increase in the potential correlation between parental influence and enrolment growth. Undoubtedly, this correlation will also expand exponentially as a growing number of university graduates become parents themselves.

Growing Market demand for university graduates will, of course, also dictate enrolment growth.

These huge enrolment increases are causing, and will continue for the foreseeable future to cause, major logistical headaches for the universities, which do not have the financial resources to meet their growing needs.

The Canada Association of University Business Officers reported in 2000 that there was "at least \$3.6 Billion in accumulated deferred maintenance" in Canadian universities, and new capital expenditures are rare.

Consequently, our institutions of higher learning, generally speaking, are full. As the AUCC characterizes it, the universities have increased enrolments "at the margins" by increasing class sizes until there is virtually no room left in them.

If things continue as they are, soon there will no longer be a place for every qualified Canadian who wishes to attend university.

The moral of this sad story is best summed up by AUCC's Past-president, Robert Giroux: "This enrolment growth is unsustainable without increased government support to boost institutional capacity and hence accessibility. Without additional funds, either access or educational quality - or both - will suffer."

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