

April 9, 2014

A postsecondary enrolment bust is coming

“This enrolment boom is now over. We knew this would happen.”

by David K. Foot

For the past 15 years, Canada’s postsecondary institutions have benefited from educating the children of the Boomers. The Echo, or Gen-Y, generation includes those born between 1980 and 1996. They are now aged 18 to 34. Those born in the peak year, 1991, are 23 years old, possibly finishing undergraduate studies or doing a graduate degree.

This enrolment boom is now over. The groups coming behind them are smaller – much smaller in some jurisdictions. We knew this would happen. The Echo generation boosted elementary enrolment, then expanded high school enrolment from the early ’90s to mid-2000s. Since they’ve gone, school boards across the country have begun retrenching. It’s simply a matter of time for these school closings to move on to the postsecondary sector.

These developments aren’t without precedent. The college system in many provinces was established or expanded in the 1960s to accommodate the Boomers. Then enrolments flattened as they exited in the 1980s.

But, skeptics will argue, demographics is not destiny: enrolment declines can be offset by tapping into underrepresented groups such as immigrants, Aboriginals, people with disabilities and women. Indeed, the post-Boomer enrolment decline was partially offset by increased participation of women in postsecondary education. But women make up half the population. Changes in their participation rate can have a big impact on enrolment – so much so that women now comprise the majority of students.

The same cannot be said for today’s underrepresented groups. Each is a much smaller slice of the population than women, and, although difficult to measure accurately, together they amount to at most 15 percent, much less in many jurisdictions. Increasing the participation rates of these groups – however important this may be to society – cannot compensate for demographically driven declines on the horizon.

And what is on the horizon? The decline starts in Atlantic Canada, whose population is older than Western Canada’s, and gradually spreads across the country. Enrolments in Atlantic provinces have started dropping, despite unprecedented attempts to recruit students from central Canada and overseas. Quebec, then Ontario, will follow. Overall, the 18-to-24 age group that

grew almost 20 percent between 1996 and 2013 should contract about 10 percent over the next decade. Of course, the enrolment decline will affect some places, institutions and programs more than others.

In the face of this, what is a good strategy for Canada's colleges and universities? First, do not expand capacity. By all means upgrade outdated facilities and replace buildings where necessary, but don't create additional space. Try to accommodate any local capacity constraints elsewhere in the system or through partnership arrangements.

Second, review admission standards. A short-term response might be to lower entry marks to increase numbers, but this solution would become a slippery slope, eroding more each year in an attempt to maintain enrolment. Instead, other admission elements, such as transfer requirements, deserve attention to attract and retain students in a program, institution or the system as a whole.

Third, review recruitment strategies. Spending more resources on a declining pool of potential students leads to more competition and, ultimately, ruin for all institutions. Instead, look for alternative sources. Underrepresented groups may need appropriate support systems to succeed. A large, growing and often overlooked group is low-income households. Raising participation rates from this group, using tuition relief, financial assistance and similar policies, could be quantitatively significant.

The largest potential pool is outside Canada. While international students have become a larger portion of the student body, they still represent less than 10 percent of total enrolment. Countries with large populations are obvious sources. So are countries with large populations of student age, including Mexico, Turkey, Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines. But international recruitment has its own challenges; it is difficult to assess quality and qualifications and to ferret out fraud.

Finally, even if some jurisdictions wanted to expand their postsecondary systems, this will become more difficult: postsecondary budgets will be increasingly pressured by healthcare budgets as declining numbers of student-aged Canadians are accompanied by growing numbers of Canadian elderly. The era of postsecondary growth is over for the next decade or more.

David K. Foot, an economist and demographer, is professor emeritus at the University of Toronto and the bestselling author of Boom, Bust & Echo.

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