

Enrolment boom could soon go bust

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Canadian universities, bulging at the seams with students and worried about finding faculty to teach them, could find themselves with the opposite problem in a few years: empty classes and a glut of professors, says a noted demography expert.

And it won't be as a result of generous government funding or clever public policy, demographer and author David Foot told a conference of Ontario university faculty members.

"If the government waits long enough, the problem will solve itself," Foot said. "Ten years from now, we may be talking about a whole new era."

Strong enrolment numbers at Canadian universities of late have been largely driven by the children of baby boomers, that massive cohort born after the Second World War but before the use of the birth control pill became widespread.

That "echo generation" has been moving into the university system in recent years, but will soon be moving out of it, said Foot, a professor of economics at the University of Toronto and author of the popular *Boom, Bust and Echo* books.

In November, Statistics Canada reported that university enrolment across the country in 2004-05 had passed the one-million mark for the first time, fuelled in part by a growing number of young adults in the country.

"Don't presume that today's situation is going to persist," Foot said Friday at a conference organized by the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations.

"Demand may well be going down as the baby boom echo leaves our system."

Ontario could be hit hard

The moderating effect should be most pronounced in Ontario, where the scrapping

of Grade 13 created a surge in first-time students in 2003.

"Right now, we're in the very worst possible situation," said Foot, who slammed the former Conservative government's decision to do away with Grade 13 in the midst of the baby-boom echo as "stupid public policy."

"Five years from now, the echo is gone, the double cohort is gone; we may be facing an entirely different external environment."

Data indicate Ontario's current enrolment is a whopping 40 per cent higher than it was in 2000-01. And last week, the Council of Ontario Universities reported that demand continues to rise.

Applications for admission to the province's universities in 2007 were up 5.2 per cent over 2006 and 11.7 per cent over 2004, latest figures show.

"The number of applicants exceeded projections, as they had in 2006 and 2005," the council said. "The increased demand poses significant challenges for the university sector."

The pressure on universities to accommodate more students focusing on academics is also likely to ease and the trend may even begin to reverse, Foot said.

Employers are increasingly demanding non-academic or more practical skills from newcomers, which will tend to press students leaving high school into apprenticeships and trades, he said.

Governments have also been busy creating incentives for college applicants in hopes of taking the pressure off the university system.

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David K. Foot is a professor of economics at the University of Toronto, and co-author of the *Boom, Bust & Echo* books.