

## Baby boom meets baby bust

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By David K. Foot

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*Just as there are more postsecondary students than ever, says demographer DAVID FOOT, we're facing a shortage of professors*

September has arrived, and universities and colleges are scrambling to accommodate record numbers of students in classes and residences. In Ontario, this sudden jump in the student population is attributed to the double cohort: The government eliminated Grade 13 as the final year of high school, so two classes graduated this year instead of one.

Even Quebec and Atlantic Canada have felt the impact. The latter actively recruited students from Ontario, and its colleges and universities now face record enrollments and a shortage of residence rooms. Quebec also had a surge in applications when Ontario high-school graduates sought places there.

Some students sped up their high-school graduation, and were enrolled in college or university last fall or winter. Others are returning to high school to improve their marks, with hopes for college or university placements next year. At least one administrator refers to the double cohort as a three-year event.

In reality, even three years is probably optimistic. Today's new students are the children of the postwar boomer generation -- the so-called echo generation is an expanding population that went through adolescence in the 1990s, and will become young adults in the new century.

Ontario's echo generation peaked in 1990. Today, there are more than 168,000 13-year-olds in Ontario, compared with only 158,000 19-year-olds. Grafting that 6.3-per-cent difference onto the double cohort shows the tough job that postsecondary institutions will have to face in this decade. Other provinces face similar demographics.

In spite of the publicity that the double cohort is getting in Ontario, planning is still largely myopic. The record number of enrollments in September will lead in four years to a record number of graduates and a record number of applications to professional schools. Yet little public discussion appears to be under way about how to handle that challenge.

And the challenges don't stop there. Estimates are that Ontario will need more than 11,500 new faculty in this decade to teach the echo generation and to replace retiring professors. Other provinces face the same problem. Governments have responded by funding a limited number of new research chairs, hoping to lure qualified Canadians and others from the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

However, an even more ominous problem looms on the horizon. A recent Statistics Canada report noted that in 2000 (the latest year for which data are available) the number of newly minted doctorates was at its lowest level in five years. That should not come as a surprise. These professorial candidates are drawn from a generation born in the late 1960s and 1970s (the baby-bust generation), which had the benefit of

the birth-control pill. So, as the demand for new professors will rise, the supply will fall.

Economists might suggest higher salaries for new professors, a trend that is already apparent. But since these new faculty are not likely to be asked to teach more students, and quite likely will be given lighter course loads to help them establish a credible research agenda, that is hardly a satisfactory solution. The problem is likely to be at least as acute in the United States (their echo generation is proportionally larger than Canada's), so Canada may lose faculty candidates to the U. S.

All of this will probably mean an increase in class sizes, a greater use of technology to deliver lectures, perhaps a drop in the average academic qualification of the teaching faculty and more students studying out of province. Tuition fees will almost certainly increase, and become a major public-relations headache for colleges and universities.

Where there are challenges, however, there are also opportunities. Some current faculty may postpone their retirement or retire to teach part-time. Many current untenured and part-time faculty will have a chance to get more secure positions.

One creative approach could be to bring qualified people from business and government to start a second career in academe.

The United States faces the same demographics as Canada, so looking for faculty there is liable to be disappointing. Recruiting in countries that do not have an echo generation -- for example many European countries -- is a better bet.

Meanwhile, on the family-planning front, the late 1990s were characterized by a significantly reduced number of births. Births in Ontario now number about 130,000 annually, which is almost 40,000 (or 24-per-cent) lower than the current number of 13-year-olds. The national decline is even steeper, a whopping 36 per cent. So planning for expansion now will have become planning for contraction in the second decade of the century.

Demographics remain the single best predictor of what the education system faces. The boomers continue to haunt the system through their echo children. But the dearth of 30-year-old doctorates and three-year-old future students is the major challenge of the future for colleges and universities.

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