

CLOSE WINDOW

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Universities rise to the challenge

By PETER HALPIN

I write regarding Robert Batherson's Feb. 11 guest column in the business section, "Increasing our population, our future depends on it." Mr. Batherson cites an AIMS report which projects that by 2026, there will be "22,000 fewer students for our post-secondary institutions, a drop of 30 per cent."

According to Statistics Canada, the projected full-time student enrolment in universities and colleges will decrease by about 8,000 between 2006 and 2031 – a 23 per cent decline.

Of course, some of that projected decline can be offset by increased participation rates.

Nova Scotia has a university participation rate of more than 30 per cent (including a rough adjustment for out-of-province students and community college students). The participation rate nationally is slightly less than 25 per cent. Despite our strong university participation rate, there is room for growth, particularly among motivated and qualified students from under-represented communities – African Nova Scotians, aboriginals, the disabled and rural poor.

In addition, Nova Scotia remains the education destination of choice for out-of-province and international students. Currently, more than 16,000 out-of-province students and more than 4,000 international students are studying across the province.

Increases in population, either through immigration or inter-provincial migration, can help to offset some of the projected population loss outlined by Mr. Batherson.

A study conducted by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Council indicated that in excess of 25 per cent of out-of-province university students will remain in Nova Scotia following graduation. There is also strong anecdotal evidence that more than 30 per cent of international students will seek permanent resident status either during their studies or upon graduation. Our universities are Nova Scotia's most effective immigration program!

To maintain the current enrolment of our universities – over 42,000 undergraduate and post-graduate students – participation rates in our institutions will need to increase strongly by 2011.

All of our universities work hard at marketing themselves to students in the province, across the country and around the world. These institutional efforts are supported by EduNova, Nova Scotia's international education marketing organization.

It is also important to note that during economic downturns, many people decide to increase their employment value by upgrading their education. The high-growth jobs in the labour market of today and tomorrow demand a university education.

The projected declines in university enrolment present a serious challenge. However, much is being done by Nova Scotia's universities to create a more positive future outlook.

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