

Investing in universities key for our future

By Peter Halpin

In 1967, the folk rock group Buffalo Springfield released its timeless recording For What It's Worth. The opening lyrics remain unforgettable to this day: 'There's somethin' happenin' here, what it is ain't exactly clear'

When it comes to growing university enrollment figures, there is something happening here and across the country and the reason is clear: the market demand for a university education is growing and being driven by the knowledge economy.

Despite the demographic challenge facing our region, university enrollments continue to defy the pundits and commentators and their 'sky is falling' mantra. Young people are voting with their feet and attending university in record numbers.

For the second straight year, the region's universities have seen year-over-year increases in all key categories. Full-time undergraduates have increased by 2.2 per cent (66,775); full-time graduate students have increased 5.4 percent (7,587); international students have increased by an astonishing 15.2 percent (8,508) and there has been another notable 2.3 percent increase in full-time, first year students (13,997).

To place this region's positive enrollment picture in context, national enrollments are up by almost four percent – 32,000 more, full-time students registered this fall than in 2009. At every level and every region of the country, more young people are heading to university. Canada now has 898,000 full-time university students – 74,362 of whom are attending our universities across the region.

Paul Davidson, President, Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), says the continuing increase in university enrollment is "good news for the economy. University graduates are part of the solution to increasing Canada's productivity and innovation. They possess the necessary critical thinking, research and analytical skills in demand by employers. They also contribute more than 40 percent of Canada's tax base."

The demand for university graduates in the last 20 years has been high: of the 1.5 million new professionals and management positions created, 1.3 million were filled by university graduates. The increased demand is a direct response to the shift in Canada's labour market from a resource-based economy to a knowledge-based economy.

So, what's happened in Atlantic Canada to spur increased growth in university attendance?

Dr. Robert Campbell, President, Mount Allison University, Sackville, NB, and Chair, Association of Atlantic Universities (AAU), attributes the positive enrollment trends to “increased marketing by our universities regionally, nationally and internationally and recognition by students and their families that the high paying jobs of the rapidly emerging knowledge economy require a Bachelor’s degree, at a minimum, and in many cases a post-graduate degree.”

Recent research conducted by the AAU indicates that our region’s universities are increasingly seen as a destination place. According to data recently released by the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC), the number of Canadian students from outside the Maritimes has increased to more than 13,000 with notable increases from Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia and Quebec.

Dr. Campbell attributes the attraction of the region’s universities to parents and students from outside the region, noting that “they see the close connection between learning, community and history associated with our institutions being located in many of Canada’s oldest cities and towns.”

Despite the fact that Canadian university enrollments have increased by an incredible 57 percent over the past ten years, Atlantic Canada’s demographic trends remain a major challenge. According to Dr. Campbell, the region’s universities “must continue to work hard at being nationally and internationally competitive, by doing so we provide outstanding learning environments for our students and a prosperous economic future for Atlantic Canada and its communities.”

The economy is in for a dramatic demographic shift over the next two decades. By 2030, the number of people over the age of 65 will double, while the 25-64 year-old population will grow by a mere eight percent. There will be a huge demand for professionals such as doctors, lawyers, accountants and entrepreneurs. It is for this reason that governments will need to continue to invest in universities if they are to provide innovative research, meet the country’s labour shortages, attract international students and open their doors to more under-represented communities, such as Aboriginal students – the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population.

The bottom line is that a university education is the door to opportunity for young Canadians as noted by the AUCC’s Mr. Davidson, “over a lifetime you can expect to earn to earn \$1.5 million more if you have a university degree than if you have just finished high school.”