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University education programs responding to needs

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In recent weeks, there has been talk on the issue of provincial certification of more teachers than existing job openings in Nova Scotia. This debate is not new. As our universities offer comprehensive teacher education programs, we want to provide information about the need for teacher education.

In the early 1990s, over 1,000 teachers were certified each year by the province, although only 100 were obtaining teaching jobs in Nova Scotia.

The government of the day commissioned a report that recommended programs be reduced and the provincial universities prepare 350 to 400 teachers a year for certification. These recommendations were implemented and since that time, our programs have limited the number of students to 350 to 400 per year, even though we have had three to four times that number of qualified applicants.

Many of those who were not accepted to Nova Scotia universities went to programs in neighbouring provinces or in the state of Maine, transferring their resulting teachers' licences to Nova Scotia upon graduation.

The oversupply of teachers is not due to lack of planning on behalf of the Nova Scotia government or the universities. The 350 to 400 graduates per year in the last 15 years have met the need for replacement of retirees in the school system. The oversupply we are experiencing is a result of students choosing a career in education, wanting to contribute to the development of future learners and a learning society. Is this not something that universities should encourage?

We understand the need to maximize the number of options available for our students after graduation and have responded as such. Each of our institutions has a local advisory committee that we meet with on a regular basis to discuss the changing nature of public and First Nations education. Through these advisory committees, we have adjusted the composition of our enrolments, focusing more heavily upon areas of more immediate higher demand such as physical sciences, French, mathematics and under-represented groups such as Mi'kmaq and African Nova Scotian teachers.

We have adjusted our teaching programs while also assisting our students to achieve broad employability skills. In addition to public school teaching, graduates of our programs take up educational careers in private companies, public service, health care, the military, the media, international education and community development. Also, many of our graduates are working in our Nova Scotia schools abroad, in China and the Middle East.

Much time and work have also been devoted to enhancing the qualifications of our practising teachers and re-tooling skills in crucial areas such as Mi'kmaq language, Africentric education, mathematics, inclusive education, middle school, rural education and instructional leadership.

Our institutions are required to maintain a complex understanding of a wide range of educational issues, while being on the leading edge of innovative practices in areas from mathematics and technology education to family studies, arts and special education. In addition, our teachers need to be equipped to address contemporary challenges such as bullying, 21st-century learning skills, and anti-racist education, to name a few.

The idea that our programs could just eliminate seats to respond to changing demands would threaten the capacity of our province to be leaders in all of these specializations.

Nova Scotia's teacher education institutions also invest a considerable amount of time to ensure our graduate programs are providing existing teachers, administrators, and adult and community educators with the critical research skills required to further develop our province's education and workplace learning environments. With the introduction of the inter-university PhD in educational studies at our three institutions, Nova Scotia now has the enhanced research capacity for our province to further address our educational challenges through the development of our own policy and practical solutions.

For Nova Scotia to prepare for the jobs of the future, we need an open, high-quality educational system.

The teacher education programs offered at Nova Scotian universities have shown great adaptability and flexibility in order to respond to the changing market requirements while making sure we don't lose sight of the unique education needs within the various populations of Nova Scotia.

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