

Vancouver Island University expects surge of students as economy worsens

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When Katherine Jones lost her job in the forestry sector last June, she was determined to find a career that wouldn't fall victim to economic forces.

"I looked into something where the odds were slim I would be laid off again," said the Duncan resident, who worked as a lumber grader at Canadian Bavarian Millwork & Lumber Ltd. in Chemainus. So she switched fields, and is now studying to become a practical nurse at Sprott-Shaw Community College in Nanaimo.

Many people like Jones are turning to education for economic stability in unstable times. About 40,000 jobs are predicted to vanish across the province in 2009, according to an economic report by Central 1 Credit Union released earlier this week.

And it's not just resource-based industries like forestry, the construction sector is predicted to shed about 25,000 jobs, followed by retail and wholesale trade, which are expected to see 11,000 jobs lost.

Meanwhile, post-secondary institutions, especially college programs, are expected to see a steady increase in students as the economic downturn leads to more cuts.

Enrolment at Vancouver Island University already experienced a 9% jump in the number of students enrolling in the fall semester compared to the previous year. This comes after several semesters of flat student numbers.

VIU officials say the school gaining full university status last spring and shedding its Malaspina University-College name likely contributed to the boost, but the economy played a significant factor.

Sprott-Shaw Community College is also expecting a spike in students. The private school even saw an increase in students during a lull in the economy in 2002-03, said Bruce Wilbee, associate director of the local college. He's starting to notice more laid-off forestry workers coming through the doors.

"We've had a few people come in during the last week and a half from that," he said.

And this could be just the beginning. Faculty and student unions say that governments will have to act fast to help underfunded schools meet a surge in demand for post-secondary education this fall, while ensuring people who have lost their jobs can be quickly retrained so they can get back into the workforce.

Typically when economic crisis strikes, more career-focused college programs are the first to swell with students, said the president of the union representing university faculty in B.C.

After that, university courses are next to fill up with students who may be hoping the recession won't outlast the years it takes them to finish their degrees.

"The problem is we're not ready for it," said Paul Bowles, with the Confederation of University Faculty Associations, who is also an economics professor with the University of Northern B.C.

Unions and the provincial government each present different pictures of post-secondary funding.

Bowles said the province needs to restore the 2.6% cut to post-secondary institutions the province made last March so they are ready to deal with rising numbers of students. CUFA contends that while overall funding for higher education in B.C. is increasing, the number of students and the costs of equipment, services and supplies are rising at an even faster rate, which means the government provides 12% fewer real dollars per student today than in 2001.

But the Ministry of Advanced Education counters that B.C.'s institutions are well-positioned for a spike in students.

Since 2001, the government has increased the operating budget for public post-secondary institutions by 40%, an e-mail from the ministry said, while the province also added 32,000 public, post-secondary seats. Another 6,000 seats will be added across the province for the 2009-10 school year.

In 2007-08, 95% of the 174,000 seats in public, post-secondary institutions were filled, according to the ministry. An extra 9,000 seats were available in the event of a spike in enrolment.

Steve Beasley, executive director of the Vancouver Island University Students Union, said those numbers are "some creative finance on their part."

"They create spaces by telling institutions they have to produce X number of students. They don't create spaces by adding more funding," he said, adding that he expects a surge of students at VIU come the fall.

Last spring, the local university grappled with a \$3.2-million budget shortfall, which led to staff reductions equalling about four and-a-half full-time employees.

At the time, the school's president Ralph Nilson said the shortfall was partly the result of \$1.3-million budget reduction for VIU -- at the time still called Malaspina -- due to provincial funding cuts. A decline of 400 students over the previous year had cost the institution \$1.5 million.

Funding for public post-secondary institutions are based on the full-time equivalent number of students attending. VIU spokeswoman Toni O'Keeffe said that about 51% of the school's funding comes from the provincial government, while the remainder is raised through business operations, tuition and other sources.

Nanaimo-Parksville MLA Ron Cantelon said the province is ready for an influx of students and VIU is "very capable and very well placed to handle the training needs of the central Island."

As the economy sputters and more workers are laid off, colleges could be scrambling to retrain these people, says the CEO of the Association of Canadian Community Colleges.

"I think we can expect major increases in enrolment," said James Knight. "This recession is deep, it will cause people to lose jobs. So colleges are going to have to figure out with the provincial and federal government how we train large numbers of displaced workers."

Knight has been lobbying the federal government not only for increased funding for colleges but also for reforms in policies to make education more attainable for laid-off workers.

Satellite college campuses in smaller communities will play a major role this fall in retraining workers, said Knight.

"We have to provide training locally. We can't have people going off to Victoria and leaving their families behind, they won't do that.

"This is where colleges have a big advantage because they have so many campuses."

Knight said after talks with Finance Minister Jim Flaherty last week, he's optimistic that the Jan. 27 federal budget will include additional funding for post-secondary education.

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STUDENT BODY IS A CHANGING ENTITY

The student body at Vancouver Island University will likely be changing, as the institution reaches out to the world while catering to an older crowd at home.

VIU already sees a large number of students in mid-career who are looking for a change, says spokeswoman Toni O'Keefe. That trend is expected to increase with the mid-Island's aging population and tough economic times. Meanwhile, the number of younger people in the area -- including those just coming out of high school -- is expected to decline gradually over the next decade.

Although the local university plans to change its marketing plan to respond to the demographics, VIU won't only be targeting mature students.

More of the younger applicants, who often favour university degree programs, would likely come from places other than Vancouver Island.

"We will be looking outside our own demographics," said O'Keefe, adding that VIU will focus more on recruiting the 24-plus demographic locally while still marketing to youth in the region.

The institution's newly granted university status will give the institution more marketing power to draw students here, she added. O'Keefe said since Malaspina University-College made the switch to VIU last spring, the school's website has seen a 40% increase in hits with most of them originating outside Vancouver Island. The web page for the bachelor of arts site received the most attention. In the past, trades programs at VIU have been strong while academic programs have faltered. However, the start of the spring semester saw a 2.2% increase in the number of students over last year.

The environment provided by Vancouver Island and not having to compete with a hub of other schools in the Fraser Valley and Lower Mainland will give VIU some marketing advantages, said O'Keefe.

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