

Diversity improves our university and our country

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By Stephen Toope

This fall has seen the annual news stories about university enrolments. A seasonal theme: with strong demand pushing university entrance averages, how on earth can UBC be deliberately increasing the numbers of out-of-province and international students? After all, isn't it called the University of British Columbia?

Indeed it is, and I want to make the case for why our enrolment goals support British Columbia and enhance its place in Canada and the world.

Nationally, we are targeting a slightly larger percentage of our students to come from out of province. Most people understand why students move across provincial boundaries: program choice, for example, or the chance for personal growth in an exciting new locale. As British Columbians we'd complain if any province were to limit education opportunities for our students.

In fact, this national flow of university students is a major nation-building contribution, creating lifelong personal links in every sphere of Canadian life, in every corner of the country. Historically, B.C. has been a net exporter of university students to other regions of Canada. We have been losing talent; now we are attracting it, too.

International student mobility is not always as well understood. The gains for British Columbia are extremely important, but first it helps to see the global view.

The *Economist* reported in August that international students average 21 per cent of students at the 10 highest-ranked universities in the world. According to the article, Canada has about five per cent of the world market for international students.

That's not bad for a country of our size, but is it good enough? For a university such as UBC, where international students make up 11.5 per cent of undergraduates and 25 per cent of graduate students at the Vancouver campus, it is not -- and we are seeking to increase it.

Why? Consider what these young men and women bring with them. Of course, they're bright and full of ambition; that's true of our students in general. But more than that, out-of-country students bring perspectives to the classroom and to dorms that lend otherwise unattainable insights into the global community for our local students.

International students bring not only their own human gifts but also a whole network of family, business, academic, cultural and social ties that Canada needs to succeed in the global community. The personal contacts that international students make during their

university years are often a precursor to a variety of new relationships, from business and diplomatic opportunities to laying the groundwork for travel-learning opportunities for Canadian students abroad.

All these activities have tremendous benefits for the B.C. and Canadian economies.

That, and tourism-related economic stimulus arising from their spending in the local economy, is some of what international students provide B.C. What do they take from B.C.? At UBC, international undergraduate students pay the total cost of their education, unlike Canadian students who receive government subsidies. So one thing they don't take is the place of a single domestic student. This isn't a zero-sum exercise; it's a net-benefit one.

Another way to see how this global ebb and flow benefits B.C. is to examine the international dimensions of research and how such students contribute to the global increase of knowledge. Globally oriented universities like UBC take advantage of strengths of partner institutions all over the world to leverage and accelerate discovery. But tending these networks takes considerable effort.

A 2009 survey ranks UBC in the top 10 of the world's universities for research collaboration with partner institutions. International students, graduate students in particular, bring with them the seeds of current and future research collaboration, tending links among their professors across the global research enterprise. Professors, in hot pursuit of their academic interests, go where ideas and like-minded colleagues concentrate, which is, in turn, a magnet for the keenest student minds.

The product of all this research is not just the spinoff enterprises that create jobs in the local economy, but in the social policy, health care and cultural spinoffs we need to tackle the huge global challenges that are just too vast for any single institution to move.

The children of British Columbians will continue to be the large majority of UBC's students.

This fall, they are welcoming their student colleagues from across Canada and around the world with not just the understanding, but the experience that this diversity is a key to their own future well-being.

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