

International students needed to boost economy

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By AVA CZAPALAY

Shortly after Nova Scotia received a historic shipbuilding contract, the federal government is presenting the province with another opportunity to build our economic future. It's up to us to mobilize and take action.

Recently, Canada's minister of immigration announced a program that would assist up to 1,000 international PhD students to become permanent residents. With most of Nova Scotia's research capacity housed within the university sector, it is imperative that Nova Scotia act now to retain this talent pool, which in turn will contribute to innovation and growth within local industries. We must not stand by and watch our most talented students move to other Canadian cities to establish careers and families.

Nova Scotia has a serious demographic challenge. Outmigration, an aging population and low birth rates are contributing to a shrinking labour force. EduNova, a non-profit alliance of education and training providers in Nova Scotia, believes that our skilled-labour shortage can be addressed in part by having more international students put down roots in the province.

According to the Atlantic Association of Universities, Nova Scotia international student enrolments have increased again this year by more than 17 per cent. With international students also studying in K-12 schools, private-language schools, career colleges and the Nova Scotia Community College, Nova Scotia punches above its weight with a total enrolment of about 8,500 international students.

Consider the impact on our communities if only 10 per cent of this talent pool chooses to remain in Nova Scotia for further studies and for work. Would 850 educated young people, many of whom speak several languages, change Nova Scotia's economic outlook? Would PhD students, many working on research that would benefit Nova Scotia-based enterprises, contribute to growing our economy?

Özlem Özgun, a Turkish-born graduate of Saint Mary's University and owner of House of Moda, is an international student who has made Nova Scotia her home. Having positioned herself as one of Atlantic Canada's top jewelry designers, Özgun speaks highly about the business climate in Nova Scotia. However, she's also seen many friends leave for larger cities due to an inability to secure work here.

When asked if many of her international counterparts are staying in Nova Scotia, she responds that it's 50-50. "A lot of my friends first looked for a job here in Nova Scotia. Once they can't find one, they leave," says Özgun. "My husband and I get pressured by friends to move to Toronto. I don't see why I would. I was able to build my business because of the supportive Halifax community."

Many students believe that Nova Scotia could do more to help them stay here. A big attraction for international students is the opportunity to study in co-op programs which combine academic studies with work experience. Enabling all international students to work, regardless of program, would help them integrate more quickly. The International Student Connector Program at Greater Halifax Partnership is on the right track, but is so far only for MBA and master of finance students.

We need more programs that specifically connect international students with employers. And not just for the benefit of students. Employers need to know what a great resource we have and open their doors, and minds, to hiring students from other countries.

Bernard Boudreau, dean of the faculty of graduate studies at Dalhousie University, is encouraged that the federal government is recognizing the potential international students bring to Canada: "International graduate students represent not only some of the best and brightest minds from their countries of origin, these are adventurous and highly motivated individuals who are willing to come to a culturally and often linguistically different country in pursuit of their educational goals.

"They consequently possess the qualities that Canada states it wants in its immigrants: self-motivation, independence, a desire to succeed, and high-order skills and education."

The immigration minister has given us a platform on which to retain the most highly skilled of these students. We need to take advantage of it by collectively extending a welcoming hand to international students and giving them reasons to stay here.

Ava Czapalay is president and CEO, EduNova (www.edunova.ca).