

Public sector prepares for baby boomer exodus

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OTTAWA - Canada's universities are gearing up for a hiring boom in the public sector as aging baby boomers retire from their government jobs.

Four Ontario universities the University of Ottawa, Ryerson University, York University and the University of Toronto are the latest in the rush to create new public management or public policy programs and tap into the thousands of jobs that will open up at all levels of government as boomers retire over the next decade, said Sandford Borins, president of the Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration.

Three of the schools are starting master's degree programs and the University of Ottawa is launching a mid-career management program that's aimed at producing better financial and human-resource managers widely considered big management weaknesses in the federal government today. The University of Saskatchewan and University of Regina are also teaming up to explore putting together a graduate program.

"I don't think there are any worries for the schools these days," said political scientist Sharon Sutherland. "Look at the hiring of the federal government alone. The turnover will be so huge even if programs proliferate all over, it will take some time before they are more than a drop in the ocean."

It's also a reflection of the reality that a university degree particularly a master's degree is becoming the minimum qualification for many federal jobs and that working in government isn't the turnoff for young grads that it was a decade ago when the Liberals cut 50,000 jobs.

Other than when governments weren't hiring, university professors say Canada's public policy students never lost interest in working in the public sector. They say idealists are typically drawn to the voluntary sector and think-tanks; those who "want to make a difference" or have an impact lean to government and others go for the higher-paying consulting jobs in the private sector.

Borins said the big difference these days is government jobs look better now that the "bloom is off the private-sector rose" in the wake of the technology meltdown and the series of scandals, from Enron to Worldcom, that rocked the corporate sector.

Raised in a global economy, students are now more interested in international rather than domestic affairs. Sutherland suspects one of the reasons for the growth of master's degree programs is that the undergraduate degree in political science that used to be one of the key entrees into the bureaucracy has shifted its focus to international politics from Canadian political institutions and domestic politics.

The University of Ottawa is also setting up a new master's program in public affairs and international development.

At the same time, existing public administration schools are busting at the seams and expect enrolment to continue to rise over the next several years. Enrolment at Carleton University's public administration program, the oldest in Canada, grew about 20 per cent this year and the school is braced for another 25 per cent jump next year, said Susan Phillips, director of Carleton's program.

But the new and expanded programs won't produce enough graduates to fill the anticipated demand for workers who will also be in big demand from all employers. So far, the massive turnover predicted in the public service has yet to materialize and boomers are staying in their jobs longer than expected. But demographics show the exodus is coming.

Last year, hiring in the public service grew more than 22.8 per cent.

It's estimated that 40 per cent of Canada's public service can retire by 2011. More than half of all public servants are now between the ages of 45 and 64 and 40 per cent are between 25 and 44 years old. It's the same picture in the upper ranks, where the top four layers of executives are all about the same age, between 50 and 53.

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