

Special Editorial

Cutting ESL at Kwantlen:

A Decision that is Both Wrong *and* Wrong-Headed

By Diane Walsh, Member-at-Large

"The essence of what we argue for as educators, what we care for as a humanity, would be deemed insignificant if we ignore all of our voices and fail to do what is necessary to educate all that truly seek a higher education." Rashné Jehangir, *Urban Education* 45(4).

ELST section cuts at Kwantlen and the subsequent faculty layoffs are difficult to understand, and this incomprehensibility is due not only to the situation's complexity but also due to the lack of sense that can be made of them from educational/institutional or social/economic perspectives.

The cuts have been managed in a way that seems arbitrary, uneven and unfair. In response to a general budget cut, senior administrators have focused only on reductions to educational offerings. This is all quite puzzling.

These cuts to educational offerings and subsequent layoffs of faculty members are both wrong and wrong-headed.

Educational/Institutional Perspectives. Many students at Kwantlen require academic upgrading and the development of their skills in order to be successful in post-secondary studies. Our colleagues in the English Language Studies (ELST) department are professional ESL educators who design and deliver high-quality English language education. Besides being necessary for employment and in community life, this programming leads directly into and supports students' success in all Faculties across the institution.

In fact, Academic and Career Preparation (ACP) and ELST coursework appears in the academic histories of about 23% of all KPU graduates, according to a recent Kwantlen IA&P study. This of course does not take into account the number of registrants across the institution who take coursework in ELST or ACP and also take courses in other Faculties but who do not complete a credential at KPU. Developmental programming—ELST and ACP—is vitally necessary in supporting students' gaining entry into other programs and their success in post-secondary education at KPU as well as in their successful participation as citizens of our region.

These cuts also make little sense at a time when we can foresee that the region's demographics are making the same kinds of shifts already witnessed in other regions. The [population of 18-24](#) year old high school graduates in the region will soon be in decline. In addition, [Kwantlen's region](#) has a higher than average population of people who have no knowledge of English, a total of 6.0% of all residents compared with a province-wide average of 3.4% and a GVRD average of 5.7%.

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At the same time, adult residents of [our and neighboring regions](#) tell us they are keenly interested in education that will enable them to advance in their existing careers or to change careers altogether, and this education means their re-entering formal education. Increasingly, our student population will be a mature student population, and many of these mature students will require developmental education to ease their entry into formalized education, to enable them to meet pre-requisite requirements, and to refresh their academic skills.

Thus, cuts in developmental programming make little sense if our goal is to serve the citizens of our region and to provide the educational opportunities they want and need.

Social / Economic Perspectives. These cuts also make little sense from social and economic perspectives. High-quality, professionally delivered English language education is the foundation for social and economic success for a large number of citizens in our region. People who have made the decision to leave their countries of origin where English is not the official language and who come here to make a new life need access to English language education in order to be able to participate fully. Public post-secondary education must be accessible to all citizens, including our domestic ESL students. And these cuts and the way in which they have been managed and interpreted here at Kwantlen lead only toward reduced access.

Furthermore, at the same time as these cuts are being made to seats for domestic students because of a general cut to institutional revenue, we are informed that spaces in ELST for international students will be maintained and increased. The revenue generated in ELST by international enrollments, it seems, will not be used to provide access for domestic ELST students who are Canadian citizens, permanent residents and refugees, people who are citizens of the region.

The promise that has always been made is that international enrollments would not serve to displace Canadians, and that they are meant to create opportunities, not take them away.

The provincial government, in its "[Letter of Expectations](#)" to KPU, says under the section titled, "The Institution's Accountabilities" that KPU must "provide [...] English as a second language [...] programs that meet the needs of its designated region." Furthermore, the Letter emphasizes that the institution should

Ensure that the Institution's priorities reflect the Government's goals of putting families first; creating jobs and building a strong economy; open government and public engagement; and providing regional access to post-secondary education throughout the province so that students can balance family needs and achieve their educational goals which helps families and benefits communities.

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Unilateral cuts to ELST programming for Canadian citizens, permanent residents and refugees do not seem to fit this mandate or advance these goals.

Cutting Only Sections and Faculty. Also, it is difficult to understand why the Kwantlen administration's response to a general budget cut has focused only on reductions to educational offerings. Other institutions, institutions that in some cases are facing far larger budgetary cuts, have taken the first step of looking at the non-educational side in their budgets for the shortfall. KPU has taken the first (and thus far the only) step of making cuts directly to educational offerings.

This certainly raises some interesting questions about why the administration at KPU is taking the line they are.

Social Justice or Social Injustice? Finally, the cause of social justice is not being served by these actions. Education can provide opportunities for individuals to change their lives, for communities to be made stronger, and for citizenship in the broadest and most inclusive sense of that word to be extended to all. And social justice pursued by means of education yields benefits well beyond the scope of the benefit to the individual. There is ample research that shows the value of education to individuals, particularly for those individuals who do not have access due to language, literacy and/or social barriers. There is ample

research that shows the value to our society and our communities that can be attained by providing access to high-quality education.

Our governments and our administrators must make good on this knowledge locally and immediately by providing affordable and accessible developmental education.

In short, looking at the matter from multiple perspectives, these cuts are both wrong *and* wrong-headed.

If you would like to comment on this issue, please reply to [Diane Walsh](mailto:Diane.Walsh@kpu.ca) (Diane.Walsh@kpu.ca).

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