

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Come from Jamaica, and feel all right

Okanagan College program helps Caribbean students earn Canadian credentials and supplies B.C. employers with much-needed staff

BY MOIRA DANN VICTORIA

When Bernie Gooding, regional manager of Craftsman Collision in Victoria, first met the two students from Okanagan College who were to do their practicum in his auto body shop, he was curious.

"I had to ask them, 'Are you guys okay?' I think the temperature that morning was about 9 or 8," he says with a laugh, remembering their recent meeting. "They came into the office ... and they were both wrapped up - a winter parka, a scarf, a hat." Mr. Gooding was in shirtsleeves.

Student Anthony Spencer laughs, too: "The first thing we learn in Jamaica is that Canada is cold."

Mr. Spencer and Noel Mohalland, both from Jamaica, are part of an innovative program developed by Okanagan College in Kelowna, B.C. The two men, both in their late 40s, are taking part in work-study programs designed to attract foreign students to help meet skilled labour shortages in British Columbia.

Okanagan is partnered in the initiative with industry training organizations and governments, here and in Jamaica.

AIMING FOR CERTIFICATION

The eight-month program Mr. Spencer and Mr. Mohalland are in will prepare them for the exams that will give them Red Seal Certification as journey tradespeople in Canada. Both worked in auto body repair in Jamaica, but say the training here will take their skills "to another level."

The students do eight weeks of classroom time at Okanagan College, a 16-week paid practicum with employers across the province, and then another eight weeks in the class before taking the exam. The government of Jamaica helps with tuition as needed. Right now, there are about 70 Jamaican students in varying stages of the program.

The program currently encompasses auto collision repair work and culinary arts, two sectors starved for skilled labour. There are plans to expand the program to other trades with a need for skilled workers, such as carpentry. Workplace demands can change in a volatile economy, so labour needs are frequently reassessed.

BEYOND THE BORDERS

Despite the "guessing game" that is labour market forecasting in today's economy, Okanagan College president Jim Hamilton believes the province may well have to continue

to look outside Canada's borders for skilled labour in some sectors, even if there is a downturn.

Mr. Hamilton says what started for Okanagan as an international student recruitment initiative directed at the Caribbean has become something much more: An effective dovetailing of education and regional economic development.

While naturally concerned about the economy, Mr. Hamilton doesn't foresee catastrophe if it "cycles down," nor does he predict negative effects on this program and others at Okanagan College, the second-largest trades training institution in the province after the British Columbia Institute of Technology.

Mr. Hamilton says enrolment could even increase during an economic downturn, as students who interrupted their studies to take a job during boom times return to complete their schooling, or people decide to retrain for new skills.

COST TO TAXPAYER?

Mr. Hamilton says one question that comes up about Okanagan's foreign students program is the issue of Canadian taxpayers paying to train people who might then return to their homeland.

"It's not our intention to do that in this program; we're working on a cost-recovery basis," he says.

"The fact that we're able to bring in students from other countries and charge them a higher tuition rate - and it is substantially higher than what we charge domestic students - allows us to open up additional opportunities for our domestic students," Mr. Hamilton says.

Though the international program is unique, tuition for the foreign students is \$5,000 for 16 weeks of instruction, while domestic trades students and apprentices pay about \$1,500 for the same time frame of instruction.

"I think the Caribbean students have been a huge addition to our community at the college," Mr. Hamilton adds. There are about 115 students from the Caribbean on campus this fall, while two years ago there were "almost none."

This year, the college has seen a 24-per-cent increase over last year in the international student population.

"We've had overwhelmingly positive support from our community for this initiative both in terms of the employers who are providing opportunities for students to work and ... the community itself," Mr. Hamilton says.

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Okanagan College president Jim Hamilton

POTENTIAL IMMIGRANTS

While B.C.'s shortage of skilled workers is partly eased by the foreign students during the practical part of their training, the hope of employers is that many will elect to stay here.

Both Mr. Spencer and Mr. Mohalland, who heard about the program through Jamaica's department of labour, do want to stay in Canada.

They look forward to the day, after they've passed their certification exams, when Mr. Mohalland says they can apply to bring their wives and children to Canada.

The two, who plan to settle in the Victoria area, say they undertook this challenge because even though they are both skilled tradesmen, good-paying opportunities are limited in Jamaica. They are working hard to upgrade their skills, pass the certification exam, and start a new life in Canada.

It's a big change but as Mr. Spencer says: "I'm willing to go through that change."

Craftsman Collision contributes more than an apprenticeship placement, Mr. Gooding says. The company also offers help in finding accommodation. "In the beginning, the company assists them to get set up with tools and other things needed to get the job done. And in return they stay with us and fix our cars and be happy and it's a win-win," he says.

"It's been great for everybody."

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Anthony Spencer, kneeling, and Noel Mohalland, standing centre, both from Jamaica, are auto body repair students doing their practicum at Craftsman Collision in Victoria. They are part of a program aimed at foreign students at Okanagan College in Kelowna, B.C. SAM BUFALINI FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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