

## Stakeholder summary

### New reports explore the stark realities of the university doctorate

Doctoral enrolments in Ontario universities have nearly doubled over the last decade, with roughly two-thirds of doctoral students hoping to become university professors. Considering that Canadian full-time professors are now the highest paid in the world – working more hours but enjoying better job satisfaction than their counterparts in other countries – it's a worthy goal.

But according to two new reports from the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)** the supply of full-time faculty positions vastly outstrips the demand. Estimates are that less than 25% of Ph.D. students in Canada will secure full-time, tenure-stream research and teaching positions, prompting a growing angst among current and newly minted PhDs about their preparedness for life in a non-academic career.

#### Project descriptions

The HEQCO @Issue paper, *So You Want to Earn a PhD? The Attraction, Realities and Outcomes of Pursuing a Doctorate*, is a detailed synthesis of current research about the changing landscape of the doctorate in Ontario. *Beyond Labs and Libraries: Career Pathways for Graduate Students* is a qualitative study of the views of 67 (predominantly) doctoral students and graduates at two Ontario universities, based on 12 focus groups and four telephone interviews conducted in the summer and fall of 2012.

From the rise in doctoral enrolments to labour market pathways, the reports provide a comprehensive picture of the world of the doctorate, underscored with candid student accounts of their experiences along the road. Both reports conclude with recommendations for students, institutions and governments.

#### Findings

Doctoral enrolments in Ontario increased from more than 10,000 in 1999 to just over 19,000 in 2009, largely driven by federal and provincial funding that anticipated the retirement of older university faculty members and an expanding undergraduate student population (especially in Ontario). Although data consistently show that doctoral graduates in Canada have among the lowest rates of unemployment, the current reality in academe is a dearth of opportunity – which focus group participants attribute to funding cuts, the end of mandatory retirement, larger classes, more courses being taught online and the growing use of contract positions to replace faculty retirements.

*"I attended a workshop last May [where one of the speakers put it in perspective]. Over the years he has had 33 students who went through his lab, all of whom wanted to be in academia, 2 of which actually are. For me it was 'Oh crap, I need to find something else to do.'"*

Yet despite the shortage of academic jobs, many doctoral programs, particularly in the social sciences and humanities, continue to train and mentor students for careers in academia that are getting harder to come by.

Often, doctoral students who pursue non-academic employment feel at a loss after graduation, according to the HEQCO reports, particularly if they have had little contact with the world outside of academia. A majority of the participants in the qualitative study said their graduate education had not adequately prepared them for careers outside of traditional academic paths. Some said they feel unable to talk openly with their supervisors about their thoughts or plans outside of academe.

*"...I feel like there's a sense of resistance to promote [non-traditional academic work opportunities] to PhD students. Even just having a conversation about working outside academia is a hard conversation to have. It's something you just don't talk about..."*

While efforts are being made to provide doctoral candidates with internships and other exposure to non-academic career paths, they are largely voluntary initiatives and are not part of the requirements of most doctoral programs. And although research shows that doctoral students feel they had a supportive advisor and experienced a good quality of teaching, they are less enthusiastic about career development and other professional skills training, noting that career services seem to be more targeted to undergraduate students.

*"When I see the ads on campus I try to go in to see what's there but I don't feel like it's set up for grad students. Definitely geared to an undergrad audience."*

[Mitacs](#), a national organisation offering research and training programs to graduate students and postdoctoral fellows in Canada, was cited in the focus groups as helping to bridge the gap between academia and industry through practical and applied experience, and links to potential employers.

### **Recommendations/Policy implications**

Among recommendations from the qualitative research study: create a central repository of all opportunities/initiatives in support of students' professional skills development and career training, ideally shared openly across programs within and across universities; before they begin their graduate programs, provide students with access to information on career options and skills required; offer graduate-level internships and mentorships; and track career outcomes of graduated students.

The @Issue paper recommends that governments consider their objectives in promoting increased PhD enrolments and monitor whether the investments are leading to desired outcomes, taking into account the actual demand for PhD graduates in the labour market. Graduate programs should acknowledge that the majority of PhD graduates will not secure full-time academic positions and institutions should be more transparent about attrition rates and labour market outcomes.

The authors note that students should consider whether a doctoral program is really suited to their personal goals, interests and labour market aspirations. They should talk to other students and recent

graduates about their experiences, ask about professional development opportunities and insist that their academic program provide statistics on labour market outcomes and career pathways of recently graduated students.

Authors of *So You Want to Earn a Ph.D.? The Attraction, Realities, and Outcomes of Pursuing a Doctorate* are Vicky Maldonado, Richard Wiggers, HEQCO; and Christine Arnold, a doctoral student and former HEQCO research intern.

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