

Producing more PhDs

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The Conference Board says we need to train more PhDs in Canada. Good. Now, where will they work?

A widely noted report last week by the Conference Board of Canada gives Canada an “A” grade for its overall performance in education and skills, up from a B last year. We also rated an A and B, respectively, in terms of the percentage of Canadians who’ve completed college and university. The only black mark in the board’s otherwise relatively positive review is a D for the number of PhD graduates the country produces.

“Increasing the number of graduates with advanced qualifications ... is important for enhancing innovation and productivity growth – and ultimately for the future quality of life of Canadians,” says the report, entitled [How Canada Performs: A Report Card on Canada](#).

I will take the need and benefit of more PhD graduates for Canada at face value. It is something the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada has been saying for some time.

However, I can’t help but wonder what jobs, exactly, there’ll be for all these newly minted PhDs. I don’t think I’m going out on a limb by saying that the majority of PhD students envision for themselves a future in academe. But, with the current budgetary woes at most universities, hiring freezes are more the order of the day.

A recent [Inside Higher Ed article](#) says of the situation in the U.S: “The job crisis for faculty jobs – especially for new PhDs looking for tenure-track jobs – is spreading.” It reports on sharp drops of 25 to 50 percent in the number of available positions in disciplines such as history, economics, English and foreign languages.

In [a related piece](#) in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a professor counsels that if you’ve had your PhD for more than two years and are still in an unsatisfactory teaching position, “then I suggest you cut your losses and look for options outside of academe. ... Accept that your hope of being a tenured professor has reached a dead end. Overcome academe’s indoctrination process, which tells you that leaving academe means failure.”

But here’s the rub: how well are universities preparing PhD grads for a career outside academe? Is it even a university’s role? It’s an issue explored in our cover story, [“Give us the dirt on jobs,”](#) in the February 2010 issue of *University Affairs* magazine and available online. I hope it generates much discussion.

One last point: in Canada, roughly two-thirds of PhD grads do already end up outside academe. I wonder what the receptor capacity is in the private and public sectors for absorbing significantly greater numbers of PhDs. And I’m not talking just any jobs, but jobs that make good use of a graduate’s talents and offer fair compensation for their substantial educational background.

We often hear of Canada’s poor receptor capacity for translating university research into innovative products and processes. Will we have a similar situation with our graduate students? This is not so much a university problem, but a challenge both for the private and public sectors to value, capitalize on and adequately compensate highly qualified personnel. Are we up to the challenge?