

Experts press for more flexible PhD programs, shorter completion times

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Individualized programs, less coursework and scrapping comprehensive exams some of the options discussed at Future of the Humanities PhD conference in Ottawa.

At the final panel discussion of the two-day [Future of the PhD in the Humanities](#) conference held at Carleton University May 17 and 18, a trio of senior administrators took aim at the structure of PhD programs and completion times. Despite it being the final event, the room was packed, prompting one speaker to quip that this is proof of how eager the academic community is to review the state of doctoral education in Canada.

In turn, panelists Peter Ricketts, provost and vice-president, academic, at Carleton; Sandra den Otter, associate dean of graduate studies at Queen's University; and Heather Zwicker, dean of graduate studies at the University of Alberta, each identified the apprenticeship approach to doctoral education in the humanities as one aspect that could stand to change.

"It's a hangover of the past," said Dr. Ricketts. "We've blended the professoriate with the academy, therefore we've tended to think of the PhD as leading to the professoriate. 'Doctor' in Latin means 'I teach,' and though that is a noble career path, there is the wider academy" that stretches beyond the walls of the university and the professoriate. Carleton, Dr. Ricketts said, has acknowledged this fact by hiring adjunct instructors with PhDs who work outside of academia in government or the non-profit and cultural sectors. Hiring instructors with non-academic experience is one way to counter the "cloning mentality," he said.

Dr. Zwicker pointed out that approximately 85 percent of doctoral students will end up working in industries that career professors and university administrators "can't even imagine." She added, "We need to move away from the sole-supervisory model. We are not reproducing ourselves and so we need to move past this." One way U of A has begun to fill these supervisory gaps is by hiring a mentorship coordinator, she said.

As for degree completion times, Dr. Ricketts encouraged dropping typical program lengths from four years to three. He suggested a consortium of universities could lead the way by reducing or cutting coursework and eliminating comprehensive exams in some of their programs. "Comps are the hill on which one dies," he said.

What's more, comprehensive exams allow students to become "self-indulgent," to "create a focus on oneself" and allow for a "myopic approach to research," said Dr. Ricketts. Programs that "increase, encourage and reward" collaboration, and are flexible, will likely lead to engaged doctoral students, and to graduates who are better prepared for a variety of sectors, he said.

According to Dr. den Otter, administrators at Queen's are figuring out that most stakeholders in doctoral education would indeed prefer this kind of openness in programs. The institution has been consulting with professors, grad students, granting agencies, employers and the public to determine what each is looking for from a PhD. Feedback has revealed a fair amount of interest in programs that would offer non-traditional options for comprehensive exams, a thesis-approval process modeled on the grant-application process, built-in community and work opportunities , collaborative or portfolio-based dissertations, and non-academic expertise on dissertation supervisory boards, among other things.

For Dr. Zwicker, unclear expectations are one of the most pressing concerns. Departments should work on clarifying degree outcomes and the expectations for each program year, and should rethink typical workloads. "The model that says, 'Go to your room and don't come out until you've finished a book,' is inadequate," she said.

By way of example, Dr. Zwicker pointed to the average academic year, which sees most professors working as full-time instructors and supervisors throughout fall and winter, and reserving spring and summer months for research and personal time. “What does that summer mean for students? We need to do better than send our students off to do quiet reading,” she said. Instead, students could be using this period to work on professional development activities, or to connect with potential research partners.

At Queen’s, program administrators have worked to improve clarity of purpose by introducing statements of expectation for undergraduate programs. Dr. den Otter said the institution is looking into rolling out similar guidelines at the graduate level.

Restructuring the humanities PhD is no small feat and attendees will have their work cut out for them, said conference organizer Paul Keen, associate dean of student and postdoctoral affairs in Carleton’s graduate studies department. He said the next step, and arguably one of the most challenging, will be for delegates to return to their institutions and persuasively present these ideas to their colleagues. The key to making change happen, he said, will be by “not mandating the change from above, not being prescriptive about it, but to go back and say ‘Here are the pathways,’ and allow them to implement them in their own ways.”

Despite the challenges ahead for the movement, Dr. Keen said that he believes the event was a success. “It’s the sense of community, the public that these events foster,” he said. “That’s what’s important.”