

Underemployment of PhDs hurts research

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By Ted Hewitt

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Statistics Canada is moving to reinstate its Full Time-University and College Academic Staff System survey, and to include information on part-timers.

The data it will reveal is bound to shed much-needed light on a growing challenge that is already well-recognized but far too infrequently discussed in academia: the recent surge in numbers of underemployed PhD graduates at Canada's universities.

Institutions have made their best efforts to encourage graduates to think beyond university jobs, and have directed more toward careers in government and the private sector. Yet serious challenges within the system remain — for recent PhDs themselves, for the renewal of the academy, and for Canada's future research potential.

Many PhD graduates do have their sights set squarely on jobs in government or the private sector. But for those who choose a research career, life has changed. Once upon a time, the path to an established academic career was clear and unambiguous: four or five years in a doctoral program, followed by a post-doc, sessional teaching, maybe a term position or two, and then, finally, nirvana — the tenure-track job.

Those days are gone. The perfect storm of expanded graduate studies enrolment, tightened university budgets, and the end of mandatory faculty retirement has meant bleak prospects for an entire generation of emerging scholars — across virtually all disciplines.

The results are that there are far fewer tenure-track positions available; more classes taught by part-time, sessional faculty; and minimal opportunities for starting academics to undertake meaningful research. In its place, they spend virtually all their time pursuing sessional teaching, which requires significant commitment in time, pays little, and offers little or no job security.

Don't just take my word for it. An emerging scholar, Katherine (a pseudonym), tells a tale that has become all too familiar:

“As an undergraduate, I knew that I wanted to go into a career where I could help people— where I could make a difference and contribute to positive change in the world. I was confident that becoming an academic and a researcher would lead me down that path. I would have the opportunity to teach a younger generation and, hopefully, inspire and motivate them to pursue

whatever career was best suited for them. I would also have the opportunity to conduct research that could help answer questions being faced in the real world, and contribute knowledge for the betterment of society.

“Closer to the end of my PhD,” says Katherine, “the realities of obtaining a permanent post in academia set in. My fellow students, who were further ahead in their careers than me, were already applying for positions. After numerous applications and very few interviews, one was offered a term teaching post at a small, undergraduate university. He decided to take the post, as he had a young family and needed to support them.”

Katherine goes on to explain that, “The issue with teaching-only positions is that the instructor is usually required to teach above a regular load held by those at research-intensive institutions. With each passing year, their CV becomes less competitive, as they don't have the time or resources to apply for funding or conduct the research that would help them land a permanent position.”

Katherine is one of the lucky ones. She was eventually hired at an institution in the United Kingdom.

“When my turn came, and I started applying for positions, the first thing that struck me was how few tenure-track, or even term posts, were being advertised,” she says. “For those I did pursue, often I did not even receive a courtesy response. As the months passed by, and with a growing family at home, I had to make some very tough decisions. In the end, with no job or no post-doc in sight, I felt I had no choice but to apply for a position outside Canada.”

The move is good for Katherine's career, but less good for Canada. And, while recently announced programs like the Canada 150 Research Chairs will undoubtedly help bring at least some young academics like Katherine back to Canadian institutions, the bigger problem remains, with limited solutions in place.

To the extent that positions do open up in future years as more senior faculty eventually retire, young researchers like Katherine may no longer be available to fill the void, having moved on to attractive careers abroad, in government, or the private sector — leaving Canada with a talent gap similar to that which occurred during system expansion in the 1960s, when institutions were forced to look outside the country for the majority of new hires.

For those young scholars lucky enough to secure a research position in Canada, the federal (and in some cases provincial) granting councils increasingly offer programs to help propel emerging careers. As a funding opportunity that targets emerging scholars and research directions, Social Sciences and Humanities Council's highly successful Insight Development Grants program is an excellent example.

The real challenge, however, lies not with existing mechanisms of research funding support, but at the level of institutions, and specifically in finding ways to expand academic offerings to accelerate onboarding of early career researchers in an environment that is increasingly

constrained financially. As Professor Julia Wright correctly pointed out in a recent University Affairs article ([How to invest in our PhDs](#), Nov. 6, 2017), faculty renewal efforts on the part of universities are part of the solution.

Beyond this, however, research funders, governments and academics themselves must join forces as part of a broader effort at system renewal and support that not only helps post-secondary institutions to ensure adequate faculty turnover, but promotes equity and diversity as a means to promote excellence in research and training. Otherwise, talent will continue to be lost, and we will run the risk of maintaining gaps that will not be easily made up through our current array of national and international recruitment strategies and programs.

Our PhD graduates deserve nothing less, and the future of the research enterprise in Canada may well depend on it.