

More PhDs? Define the “demand” first

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In a post [last year](#)

I wrote about how usually, when it's argued there is an “overproduction” of PhDs, “demand” for doctoral graduates is being implicitly defined by the number of tenure-stream jobs available while “overproduction” usually points to “not enough academic jobs for doctoral graduates.” So how do you define the demand for doctorates when we're not just talking about faculty jobs anymore? I'd been thinking about this when I saw two recent articles from Brenda Brouwer, President of the [Canadian Association for Graduate Studies](#) (CAGS): one in *University Affairs* titled, “[Canada needs more PhDs](#)”—and a similar piece in the *Globe and Mail*, “[Let's end the myth that PhDs are only suited for the ivory tower](#)”.

The argument goes something like this: while there are more PhDs than available academic jobs, the value of the PhD needs to be recognized beyond the academy; and while universities have done their part to help PhDs professionalize, other sectors should be stepping up to recruit these highly-educated people given the benefits they bring. Therefore, policies and supports should be put in place, not just by universities but also by government and other agents, to enable PhDs to make these transitions.

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[understand where this is coming from](#); in the past, I've been a proponent of encouraging PhDs to prepare non-academic employment and also mentoring and supporting them in doing so, since a [relatively small proportion](#) of grads end up on the tenure track. But I still wouldn't call for “more PhDs.” Why? Because if we're going to frame this in terms of tangible results, and primarily in economic terms, there are some questions for which we need the answers; and if universities are going to be expecting other organizations to step up and actively embrace the benefits of hiring PhDs, I think there are a few points to consider with regards to how universities seem to be handling their end of things right now.

Firstly, PhDs are discussed as a [“talent pool”](#)

, an already-valuable stock of human capital to be drawn on by the state for the purpose of economic development. They contribute “the raw assets of brains, curiosity and ambition,” associated with innovation, creativity, achievement, and ultimately, productivity and economic value. So where is the research explaining how this human capital is transformed into economic and social worth, how it “[infiltrates] all sectors” and improves how they operate? Even if everyone agrees that having more PhDs in the workforce leads to the kinds of beneficial outcomes we're after, how do we actually prove it? If there's a call for more PhDs—and more support for them from non-academic agents—this is a question that needs an answer.

The second question follows from the first one: even if we can prove that increased numbers of PhDs would contribute to these outcomes, could we show that PhDs are *necessary* to producing them? Or would we see the same outcomes with Master's level degrees and professional experience or additional specific training? How would we know? While doctoral education certainly helps cultivate skills and qualities that are desirable in non-academic contexts, it would help to have [some proof](#) that these translate in ways that other qualifications would not.

There's a specific line of logic operating here: [Canadian businesses](#) aren't known for their [R&D performance](#), and this has long been a [policy bugbear](#). Arguing that PhDs are key to increased innovation in non-academic sectors, means making a direct connection between the perennial problem of innovation (or lack of it), and the need for highly educated workers. It then makes sense to call for support for this cause, because it can be cast a way of addressing the R&D conundrum. This in turn links PhD outcomes to competitiveness, since other countries

“outperform Canada in terms of research and development expenditures and productivity” because they “actively integrate PhDs into all sectors of their economies.”

But are these countries outperforming Canada because of this, or are there other (perhaps more important) contextual factors at play? Such comparisons don’t necessarily even support the argument for more PhDs. Rather, they point to a need for more HQP throughout all sectors—which isn’t the same thing. Another problem is that of causation: increased integration of such candidates is more likely to be an *outcome* of organizational decisions to engage in research, rather than a driver of those decisions.

Lastly—Brouwer mentions

“the pressing responsibilities of the academy to ensure that our training programs adapt,” then goes on to place strong emphasis on how responsibility must also be shouldered beyond the university. This almost makes it sound as if academia has already completed its transformation, and that the problem is how other sectors need to be changed. What have universities been doing in this regard, and is it really as diverse and accommodating as is described in these two articles? How many programs are able and willing to “integrate ... ‘real world’ opportunities within the PhD program of study” or have done so already? How exactly will we “give graduate schools, businesses, organizations and community stakeholders the incentive and support to break down ... silos and clear the path for PhDs”? We have some fine examples of this happening, but I think there’s still a gap between everyday experience in doctoral programs and the rhetoric about professionalization.

Based on what I’ve seen, heard, and read, there are still widespread problems even with the basics such as supervisory support. If we really need more PhDs, perhaps universities should try harder to help all their doctoral students graduate? Surely if a significant proportion of students are [still withdrawing without completing](#), then we’re already depriving ourselves of a valuable resource? It seems universities aren’t doing all they could to ensure that those already recruited are also finishing their degrees—and that would be a helpful start.

As an organization representing universities with graduate programs, CAGS isn’t likely to suggest universities reduce their doctoral enrolments; at the same time, it’s becoming impossible to ignore a situation where more PhDs are working outside the university than in it. But questioning the causal relationship between doctoral education and desired outcomes isn’t the same as undermining the value of PhDs or assuming they’re “best suited to the academy.” After all, as Brouwer also points out, doctoral graduates have already been working with great success in non-academic realms. I’m on board with the argument that we should support PhDs in building connections and relationships beyond academe, but as for enrolling (though not necessarily graduating) even more PhDs? Until some of these pesky questions are answered ... maybe we should cross that bridge when we come to it.