

# PhD ‘overproduction’ is not new and faculty retirements won’t solve it

UA [www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/phd-overproduction-is-not-new-and-faculty-retirements-wont-solve-it/](http://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/speculative-diction/phd-overproduction-is-not-new-and-faculty-retirements-wont-solve-it/)

The wave of upcoming retirements is a myth and PhD numbers have little to do with the academic job market anyway.

In [my last post](#) I took a look at some of the history and context of Canadian universities’ hiring of contract faculty. While I was digging around for information, I couldn’t help noticing the relevance of some of the material to another ongoing debate in higher education: that of the “overproduction” of PhDs. Since “too many PhDs” is a recurring theme in media commentary about graduate education (e.g. [Nature](#), [The Economist](#)), I thought I’d explore the issue in more depth and connect it to some of the research I found. Are we really “producing” too many PhDs, and if so, is this a recent problem?

Let’s start with doctoral enrollment increases: how have PhD numbers increased over time, for example in Ontario? Recent graduate expansion has been significant within a short period. On [this COU page](#), we find the specifics spelled out: “Between 2003 and 2011, the government added funding for [15,000 additional graduate spaces](#). In the 2011 budget, the government announced funding for an [additional 6,000 graduate spaces](#)” to 2015. That’s more than 20,000 places added in about 10 years, some of it clearly an echo of the [Double Cohort’s](#) undergraduate enrollment bulge. Over that period, PhD students have comprised about 35 percent of total graduate enrollments.

Yet even this most recent expansion isn’t what led to the “overproduction” of PhDs — because of course, it isn’t really a new thing. To return to [a paper that I cited in my last post](#), it’s notable that in 1978 there was already an assumed “PhD dilemma” that was being presented and discussed as a phenomenon of the ’70s, “an imbalance between the rising supply of PhD’s and the declining demand for them, particularly in higher education.” That’s right, 30+ years ago we still had “too many” PhDs.

The key here is that PhD “production” growth has no practical connection to the demand for tenure-track faculty, and it seems likely that it never did. The one time when this may have been the case was the period of rapid massification in the 1960s and early 1970s, and by the time Canadian doctoral programs caught up, demand had dropped again.

If doctoral enrollment is not driven by the need for faculty (i.e. the academic job market), then why do universities expand their PhD numbers? There are plenty of reasons, only a couple of which I’ll touch on here. Firstly, PhD programs bring prestige to a department and contribute to its reputation. Successful supervision of doctoral students also helps with academic faculty career advancement, and brings the pleasure of graduate teaching and mentoring. So if the money is available, the option to expand or create programs is an attractive one.

Another reason is that in Ontario the money *has* been available, what with the government’s plans to expand graduate enrollments. PhDs bring more government funding than undergraduates, so they’re contributing important resources (both symbolic and material). This is also nothing new; Von Zur-Muehlen (1978) writes that “by 1975-76, Ontario universities were receiving about \$12,000 a year from the provincial government, for each PhD student, in addition to tuition fees. Thus, it was in the universities’ interest to expand doctoral enrolment.” It seems that [available funding](#), not academic job market numbers, has been the primary driver of doctoral enrollment.

If “overproduction” has been going on for so long, why is it framed as new, and why has the problem not been addressed by now? Has there ever been a point in the past when every PhD could take an academic job? I’m guessing that other than the aforementioned brief explosion of hiring in the ’60s, the PhD has never been a “golden

ticket” to the academic profession. Rather, the many graduates who continue on to other forms of work have been “invisible” because they aren’t held up as examples of success; they simply aren’t “counted.”

The culture of doctoral education as preparation for academe (even when it doesn’t sufficiently fulfil this function) also supports entrenched myths about the academic job market, such as that zombie of a trope, the “Great Wave of Faculty Retirements.” Even now — in 2015 — we see the same old idea being trotted out: because so many profs belong to the Baby Boomer generation, we can expect many of them to retire soon, which in turn means new tenure-stream openings for early-career academics. This sounds great, until you look at the facts.

One problem is the expansion of PhD enrollment, as discussed above; this doesn’t entail a directly proportional increase to doctoral graduates, since there is a relatively high attrition rate in the PhD (something else that hasn’t changed since the ’70s). But we’re still seeing far more growth in PhD graduates than in the tenure-track openings available, and there are PhDs still looking for work who graduated two, three, four or more years ago. That reserve pool of potential candidates has to be considered when we look at any job market numbers.

Then there’s the elimination of the mandatory retirement age, which was a process already underway in 1987, with four provinces and the federal government having already completed this step; Ontario followed suit in 2006. [Von Zur-Muehlen \(1987\)](#) also argues that predicting retirement is extremely difficult because it’s not straightforwardly related to age. Lastly, it’s also possible that not all tenured positions will be replaced, especially if [demographic trends](#) lead to a decline in undergraduate enrolment.

Of course the “Wave of Retirements” argument is not a new one either. Von Zur-Muehlen points to the 1984 report of the Commission on Canadian Studies report, which predicted that there would be “severe faculty shortages at Canadian universities in the 1990s.” The same arguments appeared again in five-year plans from SSHRC and NSERC, in 1985. Saeed Quazi cites early 1990s studies from the COU, OCUA (Ontario Council on University Affairs) and AUCC. By 2005, the time-frame had shifted: in their book *Higher Education in Canada*, [Beach, Boadway, and McInnis](#) argue that along with “brain drain” to the United States, “there is [...] a large number of older faculty at Canadian colleges and universities who will be retiring over the next decade and the Canadian postsecondary education system is simply not producing enough replacements for them.” The predictions of faculty shortages were refuted by research, such as this [1987 paper by Max von Zur-Muehlen](#), and a [1996 paper by Quazi](#). Yet somehow the story continued to circulate.

Even the organizations that are promoting increased doctoral enrolments aren’t referring to looming faculty shortages in their arguments (a “disconnect” I explored in more detail in a previous post, [here](#)). For example, in the COU’s 2012 [Position Paper on Graduate Education](#) (PDF), we see the argument that the latter is “crucial for sustaining and developing Ontario’s competitive position in the global, knowledge-based economy. Graduates of advanced research and professional programs in the province develop skills that are not only required in the current marketplace, but are also necessary to innovate and create future enterprises in the fields of business, science, arts and culture.” While the paper also concedes that “graduate education is...central in producing educated citizens who can promote and defend democratic values and ideals,” this sentence stands out amid the economic justifications. This is a call not for more profs, but for “[highly qualified personnel](#).” (PDF)

It’s clear that other than increased competition, there is no relationship between PhD enrollment and the academic job market, either in the numbers or in the rhetoric employed by government and higher education organizations. Yet somehow no matter how many PhDs enrol and graduate, academic careers are the goal — and the availability of more tenure-track openings is always on the horizon, 10 to 15 years away.

We can’t fool ourselves into thinking that job-market information will trump the culture of denial that persists in many doctoral programs (not that we have [great data](#) to begin with). When such a disconnect has persisted for so long, there’s a reason the myth’s been sustained. The “Wave of Retirements” story is only accepted as true because it is repeated over time without any reference to reality, and it’s repeated not just by students but by faculty from whom students seek advice. More importantly, the culture supports this story because we’re seeking ways to justify our

efforts, given that primarily *one* kind of “success” is recognised in academe. This is the academic equivalent of magical thinking.

This helps explain why the actual outcomes of PhDs haven’t been made more explicit. Surely the [high rate of attrition](#) not just from doctoral programs but also *from the profession* could not have gone unnoticed by programs over time, if the goal has been to place students in faculty jobs. And yet we still see a relative silence around this issue, or it’s treated as if it’s only a recent “crisis.”

Any discussion of PhD “overproduction” needs to take into account the important question of the purpose of the PhD. When different groups cannot agree on this purpose, at least in terms coherent enough that they can produce policies and programs that align, then doctoral students are the ones who lose out.

You could argue there’s a danger here of attaching the PhD to some notion of training for the workforce, which would be a corruption of the quest for “knowledge for its own sake.” But then I’d have to ask: if graduate education isn’t instrumental, why is there such a focus on preparation for a particular job, i.e. the tenure-track professor? Surely this is still an instrumental end for the process, and one that is less and less available to graduates. I’d be the last person to argue that the PhD should be “training” for one kind of job or another, but if that’s how it’s already being treated — and if that treatment is reinforcing some destructive myths — let’s not pretend otherwise.