

PhDs are Important Contributors to Ontario's Success – and Not Just in Universities.

January 26, 2016 | Michael Snowdon [Share](#)

I have a PhD... in the Humanities... and I'm employed.

Gainfully employed, in fact – in every sense of the word, for myself, my employer, my community, and those I work on behalf of. And I'm not employed as a professor, though I confess that's what I wanted to do when I started my graduate work, and I've swum in academic waters since earning my doctorate.

Today, I'm a Senior Policy and Data Analyst in the university sector, working with other researchers and policy experts from universities, government, public think tanks, business organizations, and other interest groups, to help enhance postsecondary student learning and outcomes in Ontario. I am one of eight people in our organization with a PhD – ranging from Spanish literature, to political philosophy, to religious studies – who use the skills and experiences learned and polished through our PhD studies every day to do our jobs better.







Mine is a job that requires deep analytical training and critical reasoning skills, depends on strong capacities to synthesize complex information and manage ambiguity, engages a deep and diverse knowledge base, leverages intellectual stamina and flexibility, and benefits from personal initiative and creative solutions. But, you might say, "policy analyst" is pretty well aligned with a PhD's research and analytical skills.

Yes, that's the point.

But my case is not unique. I have heard dozens of stories about

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the meaningful contributions that other PhDs make to improving lives in other ways.

Think about the many contributions to our daily lives made by the PhDs in your own communities. There are the entomologists working for the Ministry of Natural Resources who eradicated rabies, the education specialists in our schools who are helping children with learning disabilities head toward brighter futures, the mechanical engineers working at aerospace manufacturing plants to keep us safe on our travels. And what about the computer scientists working for the Ministry of Transportation to improve traffic flow at busy intersections to get us home to our families earlier, the doctors and technicians at our local hospitals who analyze test results when we show up at emergency with a sick family member, or the Niagara peninsula microbiologists working with new strains of yeast to deliver even better tasting local wines to our dinner tables?

A soon-to-be released report (<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/more-phds-finding-jobs-as-tenure-track-professors-study-says/article28367087/>) from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) reveals that about half of PhD holders work in academia (roughly 30 per cent as professors and 20 per cent as researchers, lecturers, post-docs, etc.) – which is pretty much in line with a report put out by the Conference Board (<http://www.conferenceboard.ca/e-library/abstract.aspx?did=7564>) of Canada last year. The most interesting aspect of HEQCO's report, though, is the flip side of the coin: more than half of PhDs actually work outside the halls of Academia. According to the National Household Survey, after academia the most common fields of employment for PhD holders were Natural/Applied Sciences (17 per cent), Government (11 per cent), Health (11 per cent), Management (9.5 per cent), and Business/Finance (5.3 per cent).

For the grads themselves, these are good jobs: with average earnings of about \$70,000 a year, they have a notable earnings premium over other levels of education. However, Canadian employers have still not come to embrace the PhD skill set as readily as our international peers.

Part of the challenge is making people aware of what these skills are and how they transfer into careers outside academia – this includes educating employers, but also teachers and students themselves. It is crucial that PhD students learn to articulate what skills they actually have because of their studies, and to take responsibility for their skills-development and think outside of academia. This is the premise of the highly successful MyGradSkills.ca (<http://www.mygradskills.ca>) website, which provides learning modules on soft and hard skills for current graduate students in Ontario. Ontario doctoral

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students can also benefit from labour market experiences through internship programs run by organizations like Mitacs and business-partnership programs funded by the Tri-Council granting agencies.

Another part of the problem is that Canadian businesses invest substantially less in R&D than other nations (<http://www.oecd.org/innovation/inno/researchanddevelopmentstatisticsrds.htm>). A robust in-house R&D sector provides a natural talent and commercialization pipeline between universities and businesses; by under-investing in R&D, businesses are relying on universities – facing increasing financial pressures – to continue to employ subject knowledge experts. The reality is that the majority of these experts end up outside of academia, many working in important, meaningful, and well-paying jobs – but nevertheless in fields outside their expertise. This can be a loss for highly technical fields.

Of course, because of their highly transferable skills, PhD holders don't need to be working in their field of expertise to bring advantage to companies and communities. In fact, a fresh perspective can be invigorating.

The bottom line is that today's knowledge economy is driven by innovation – and innovation is quite literally at the core of what PhD holders have demonstrated by conceiving, designing, executing, managing, evaluating, circulating and communicating the high-calibre, novel research that earned them their degree. And it's not just innovative skills and experience that will benefit employers and the economy – it's also the research itself. The application and commercialization of new technologies, more efficient practices, new social insights, and so forth, also drive the innovations of tomorrow that will enhance the well-being of Ontarians.

So, when people ask why Ontario's universities, businesses and their government would invest in more PhDs, the answer is simple: because it is an investment that pays off. For all of us.

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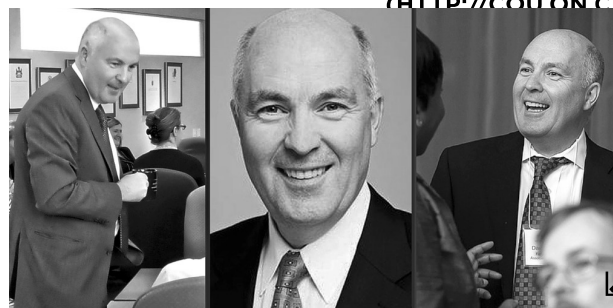
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