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Media Release

Radical changes in the offing for doctoral studies in the humanities

Bye, bye dissertation; hello greater linkage between studies and jobs?

ST CATHARINES, Ontario — May 25, 2014 — A roundtable discussion at the 2014 Congress of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences will be looking at ways to radically transform doctoral studies in the humanities in Canada.

Those transformations could include an end to the traditional PhD dissertation, higher standards for digital literacy in humanities programs, and more effort to link PhD studies in the humanities to direct prospects for employment.

Paul Yachnin, the Director of the Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas at McGill University, is one of the people taking part in the discussion.

He says there's no question a PhD in the humanities is a valuable degree, and he points to various people in positions of power in Canada today who hold such PhDs. Even if the topic of their studies has no direct relation to the work those people do day to day, he says they are valuable because their PhD gives them useful skills.

"This is what I teach my PhD students," he says. "It's skills. It's how to do really complex intellectual and interpretive tasks, such as how to find out things that are very difficult to find out."

But he said 50 per cent of the people who begin a PhD in the humanities do not complete their degree, and of those who graduate, only 20 to 30 per cent eventually get jobs in the academy – the traditional measure of success for the degree.

Those statistics, he says, illustrate the need to transform the PhD in the humanities.



Last year a group Yachnin has been working with – the Future of Graduate Training in the Humanities Project – published a white paper that suggests that instead of cutting the number of PhD students in the humanities, the programs themselves should be reformed.

Yachnin says that the PhD graduates not in the academy right now are for the most part gainfully employed. For example, says his group has been able to find only five PhD graduates in Canada who are driving taxis – and those are people who got their doctorates from non-Canadian universities. So Canadian society – and Canadian universities – need to “wake up to the value of higher-value humanities skills.”

However, he says universities are doing a poor job of tracking humanities PhDs who don’t go into the academy, “because the culture of the university says that if they don’t go into the academy we view them as having failed.”

The Future of Graduate Training in the Humanities Project makes seven recommendations, including creating dedicated placement services to prepare graduates for a variety of career opportunities; replacing the thesis with a coherent ensemble of projects, limiting programs to four or five years, setting higher standards for digital literacy; expanding the criteria by which candidates are admitted; beginning discussions on academic job prospects; and maintaining better record-keeping.

“One of the things we want to do in this conversation is not only get the administrators thinking about this, but also the people who are doing their PhDs. It is not just about the academic labour market, it is about the value that people with PhDs can contribute to society. So they need to get out from the walls of the university before they finish their PhD.”

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About the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences

Organized by the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Congress is the largest interdisciplinary conference in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Congress brings together 75 academic associations that represent a rich spectrum of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including literature, history, theatre, film studies, education, music, sociology, geography, social work and many others. For more information, go to www.congress2014.ca

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