



It's wrong to think that getting a PhD today is a waste of time

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Abstract: [...]that the job market is as is, and will not change. What the arts and humanities alumni may lack in mathematical capacity, when compared with their life-sciences counterparts, they make up for in written-language and oral-communication mastery, for which they attain levels seldom paralleled. [...]PhD holders are exceptionally apt at thinking outside the box and finding cutting-edge solutions to age-old problems no one ever bothered to toil with.

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In the past 10 years, North American universities have been churning out PhDs at a rate that far exceeds academia's own demand for professors.

A widespread misconception is that this surplus is counterproductive. As The Economist squarely put it in 2010, "doing a PhD is often a waste of time" from the student's personal perspective. But it isn't from a general, business-oriented perspective. Truth is, both economic and social gains lie in the overproduction of doctoral degrees. Yet nobody outside of academia seems to notice.

Just a few weeks ago, Maclean's reiterated that "many graduate students aren't getting the support they need to prepare for nonacademic careers." Shrugged off by high-profile employers who argue that PhD holders are overspecialized and say doctorates do not aptly prepare students to the reality of the current job market, doctoral graduates are experiencing tremendous difficulty in integrating the workforce.

They end up facing two dismal options: either settle for a humiliating "regular" job, for which they are dreadfully overqualified, or pursue their research activities in financial dire straits and wait five to 10 years until the extremely narrow window of opportunity for a tenure-track position opens up.

Many graduates do make the second choice and turn into postdoctoral scholars - that is, underpaid research professionals. People typically conclude that universities should reform doctoral programs or reduce their PhD output. While Nature's April 2011 special issue on The Future of the PhD argued in favour of the first of these solutions, The Economist rather defended the latter.

Both views are rapidly becoming commonplace, yet their purported validity stems from two fragile assumptions. First, that today's PhDs are intensive and ultra-specific trainings that exclusively lead to jobs within academia. Second, that the job market is as is, and will not change.

Doctoral graduates and postdoctoral researchers represent a great resource that has yet to be fully understood and wielded. As demonstrated by the many research activities and realizations required from them in order to complete the doctoral degree, they are autonomous, skilful, perceptive, logical, astute, hardworking, well-travelled, adaptable, creative and determined people.

They are respected as top experts in their specialty. They can bring to fruition long-term projects on tight budgets, and manage many assignments at once. What the arts and humanities alumni may lack in mathematical capacity, when compared with their life-sciences counterparts, they make up for in written-language and oral-communication mastery, for which they attain levels seldom paralleled.

Moreover, PhD holders are exceptionally apt at thinking outside the box and finding cutting-edge solutions to age-old problems no one ever bothered to toil with. Their pedigree is unrivalled.

Leading businesses are bound to tap into this unexploited well of intelligent and inexpensive work power.

Universities already have. Highly skilled, motivated, cheap, disposable labour: that is what today's PhDs are to

universities.

Discarding PhD holders as a useless mass of overschooled individuals betrays a severe lack of vision. Sure, such individuals tend to be headstrong, opinionated persons who value science and knowledge above profit or lifestyle. But indubitably that can be turned to advantage by savvy business decision-making and sound humanresources management. If doctoral graduates and postdoctoral researchers' smarts can be challenging for the lazy or fearful businessmen and women out there, they are not an unwelcome challenge for the visionary ones. There is capital gain to be made here.

That is not to say that every PhD holder alive would be the perfect employee.

As is the case with high school or college graduates, not all of them can thrive in a competitive business environment. That is part of why reducing PhD production would be abusive and socially counterproductive. Wouldn't we rather grant the people who can really only flourish in academia the opportunity to do so? And let us not neglect the actual benefits that massive research efforts afford us in the long run.

We must stop thinking universities need to adapt to the reality of the markets. They cannot, and they will not.

The only thing universities ever adapt to is the way in which knowledge can better be produced. In spite of what Nature advocates, PhDs do not require "fixing." PhD programs across the western world are producing what they mean to: research results and capable researchers.

The job market is like any other market: It fluctuates and evolves. Soon enough, it will find good use for this unheralded wealth of PhDs. The onus of change here lies not in academia. It is up to the best businesses and industry leaders to catch up and reap the fruits that universities freely produce.

Credit: SEBASTIEN ROLDAN; The Gazette