

Reimagining PhD paths at UBC:

An Integrative Approach to Doctoral Student Preparation for Diverse Careers

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Why “Reimagine” PhD paths?

Several streams of change in society and the academy have recently led to a focus on rethinking educational approaches to the PhD. The careers our graduates are entering, or could conceivably enter, are rapidly diversifying. Students frequently declare they are unaware of or feel unprepared for potential futures outside the academy. Definitions of scholarship have expanded in recent decades, and the academy increasingly values diverse forms of scholarly contribution, including that of discovery, integration, teaching and learning, application, and engagement. Governments and granting agencies increasingly require evidence of research impact beyond the academy, and many students themselves express the deep desire to contribute tangibly to the public good through their PhD scholarship. Today’s problems and questions are arguably more complex than those faced by societies in the past, and interdisciplinary, integrative, innovative and collaborative thinking are needed more than ever.

The academy (including UBC) has responded so far to concerns such as career diversification primarily by adding discrete transferable skill development courses and workshops, and experiential internships and co-op programs. These are valuable ways for students to gain competencies and experience relevant to the work they may engage in post-graduation. We argue, however, that purely skills-focused training, tacked on as an adjunct to students’ primary development as scholars oriented to academe, is insufficient. Further, the trend towards orienting the discourse on doctoral education so exclusively on useful skill development (e.g., Leitch, 2006¹; Conference Board of Canada, 2013²) runs the risk of

Hearing from the students



As a pan-university undertaking, UBC’s Public Scholar Initiative is one of the first of its kind in Canada. It aims to move beyond generic skills training and extracurricular experience, to an integrative approach. This supports diverse forms of collaborative scholarship. You can read some first person accounts [here](#).

¹ Leitch, S. (2006). *Prosperity for all in the global economy—world class skills*. Final report. London, UK: HM Treasury.

² Conference Board of Canada. (2013). *Skills—where are we today? Post-secondary education and the state of skills production in Canada*.

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constraining our views towards the multi-dimensionality of learning that is possible and desirable at the doctoral level.

Rather than reductively framing the purpose of doctoral education as a process of skill acquisition or separating the development of “professional skills” from the academic endeavour itself, we are instead attracted to the potential of “reimagining” doctoral education as an integrative experience, a primary goal of which is the holistic development of *scholar-professionals*, prepared for careers within and/or beyond the academy, and deliberate in their connection to a larger context and sense of purpose. Many students we interact with regularly indicate that it is this comprehensive, more fully relevant educational experience they seek in pursuing doctoral study.

At UBC, Graduate & Postdoctoral Studies, in collaboration with PhD students and faculty members, are beginning to experiment with re-envisioning possible frameworks for doctoral research and education, and are supporting those who are already practicing these non-traditional modes. Our approach entails widened possibilities for the PhD dissertation to include diverse forms of scholarship relevant to a variety of both academic and non-academic contexts, collaboration with and mentorship by partners within or outside the academy, and diverse forms of scholarly products. We argue that innovative, rigorous scholarship oriented to making a positive impact in the world should be a legitimate pathway for any field, and assessed and valued as part of the university’s highest degree. We are encouraged by the engagement and enthusiasm we’ve been met with thus far by our campus community.



What are we doing?

Our first outward-facing activity was a one-day symposium in the spring of 2014 on “Reimagining the PhD”, to explore possible changes to some PhD pathways in light of, particularly, the growing diversity of careers our graduates undertake. A [report on this symposium is available online](#). Subsequent conversations were held in disciplinary contexts and amongst the university leadership, and a 28-member cross-university advisory committee was established to propose next steps.

As the first tangible outcome of our discussions, a pilot “Public Scholarship Initiative” (PSI) was launched in February 2015. The rest of this paper describes our plans and activities underway in this area. As we are at the beginning of this initiative, we are not yet in a position to communicate outcomes, but plan to do so after the first year.



With the support of students' graduate programs, we anticipate expanding eligibility considerations for those serving on supervisory and examining committees.

Pilot Public Scholar Initiative (PSI)

This [initiative](#) was designed to help build connections, community, and capacity for PhD students who are interested in explicitly linking their doctoral work to an arena of public benefit, and integrating broader and more career-relevant forms of scholarship into their doctoral education process.

Students are supported in their efforts to partner with those in public and private sectors (including those with teaching or administrative responsibilities within the university) to carry out dissertation research in areas of mutual interest. They are also encouraged, if relevant, to include a variety of scholarly artifacts in their dissertation, including policy papers, websites, films, teaching syllabi, or communication material to non-academic audiences.

The three components of the initiative are:

- *academic support and broadened approaches to supervisory committee membership and dissertation structures.*
- *development of a network, including opportunities for professional development related to diverse forms of scholarship.*
- *funding to support innovative dissertation scholarship that meets the goals of the initiative.*

PSI 'scholars' were chosen through a competitive process, although aspects of the first two components are also available to those not funded or participating in the initiative directly.

Academic support for and assessment of expanded forms of the dissertation

As the forms of dissertation research evolve through this pilot initiative, so must the academic practices and guidelines related to supervision, dissertation structures, and assessment. Potentially expanded forms of the dissertation call for renewed attention to methods of assessment of scholarly rigour.

Supervisory and examining committees:

A key component of the pilot is support for collaboration of students and their UBC-based supervisors with partners from outside the university. Professionals from partnering organizations may be in a position to co-supervise the scholarly work and it could be advantageous for them to formally serve on the students' supervisory committees as they may have specialized expertise that is essential to assessing the rigour of applied

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scholarship. Efforts will be made to orient them, if necessary, to expectations and processes of scholarship at the doctoral level. Current policies do allow for external individuals to serve on students' committees, but we have normally required evidence of academic scholarship and experience with graduate supervision.

And as novel forms of the dissertation emerge, there will likely be a need to inform external dissertation examiners of the initiative, and clarify expectations and parameters for assessment.

Dissertation structures and content:

The current UBC description of the dissertation, a “substantial piece of scholarly writing that contains a significant contribution of new knowledge to the field of study...a coherent document that provides a complete and systematic account of the student's research” will not change but...

The assumptions underlying some of the terminology (“scholarly”, “new knowledge”) are also being challenged as described below (‘Assessment of Scholarly Rigour’).

The scope for inclusion of artifacts beyond scholarly journal articles will be expanded.

In addition to academic writing, a diversity of products of scholarly work, can be recognized as worthy of academic recognition and can benefit from thorough assessment. Such products can include:

- presentations at nonacademic venues
- performances, exhibitions, installations, murals, and festivals
- new curricula
- policy or consulting reports
- planning and assessment tools
- patent application

These artifacts should be of public and intellectual value, and there should be a **critical analysis** of the artifact, which could include a description of the intended audience, the situating of the artifact and its processes within a discipline or field, an explanation of its significance and originality, and a narrative of the intellectual processes that led to its creation. Our intention is to support doctoral students in the inclusion and proper assessment of such artifacts within the dissertation itself.



Assessment of scholarly rigour:

The significant work done across North America on assessing forms of scholarship beyond that of discovery^{3,4,5} has informed much of our thinking. We support the consensus that there are common standards of excellence that must apply to scholarship in all its forms at the doctoral level, including:

- The scholar states the purposes of the work clearly, defines objectives that are realistic and achievable, and identifies important questions.
- The scholar demonstrates an understanding of the relevant existing scholarship, and brings the necessary skills and resources to the work.
- The scholar uses methods appropriate to the goals, applies them effectively, and modifies procedures in response to changing circumstances.
- The scholar achieves the goals. The work adds consequentially to the field and opens up additional areas for further exploration.
- The scholar uses a suitable style and effective organization to present the work, and uses appropriate forums for communicating work to its intended audiences. The message is presented with clarity and integrity.
- The scholar critically evaluates his/her own work, brings an appropriate breadth of evidence to the critique, and uses evaluation to improve the quality of future work.
- The work requires a high level of discipline-related expertise.
- The work (both process and product) is reviewed and judged to be meritorious and significant by one's peers.

There is a growing discourse on the qualities of excellence for PhD dissertations in practice-based or practice-led research, community-engaged research, action research, and creative practice research, in addition to the above attributes. Helpful descriptions of standards for 'new knowledge' and 'originality' in these contexts have also been developed. For example, potential definitional criteria for 'new knowledge' relevant to the above forms of scholarship are applicable to all forms: the 'new knowledge' should contribute generally to the shared store of knowledge, should lead to understandings that are transferable, and should be testable and amenable to criticism. 'Originality' (in any form of scholarship) should contain innovation, speculation, imaginative reconstruction and intellectual excitement.

³ Glassick, Charles E., Huber, M.T. and Maeroff, H.I. (1997) *Scholarship Assessed: Evaluation of the Professoriate*. San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass and The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.

⁴ Elison, J and Eatman, TK. (2008) *Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University*. Syracuse, NY: Imagining America.

⁵ Diamond, RM (2002) Defining Scholarship for the Twenty-First Century. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 90:73-79.



All these attributes should be assessed both through an academic lens and the norms of rigour and excellence established within any potential non-academic context in which the work was done. This assessment may best be accomplished by a 'non-academic' supervisory committee member and/or examiner, and should be based in part on a thorough analysis by the student of the work's potential outcomes and impacts in settings within and beyond academia.

Special guidance to examination committees on expectations of defenses with significant application-oriented components is anticipated.

Development of a network and professional development related to public scholarship

This aspect, still in the planning stage, is aimed at germinating a network of students, faculty members and participants from a variety of disciplines and employment sectors to engage in dialogue, mentorship and collaboration on endeavours that use rigorous scholarship in non- or alternative academic settings. PhD students will benefit from interacting with like-minded others across disciplines and sectors and building networks of scholarly and professional contacts. Professional development opportunities will be offered to enhance understanding and competencies in publicly-engaged scholarship. This is intended to synergize with current university resources, including a community-based research initiative focused on building capacity for such research among faculty.

Funding

Funding (up to \$10,000 per student) is intended to support innovative dissertation scholarship in the public interest which the student would otherwise be unable to pursue. Funding can be used for a student stipend, if the student's current funding source would not allow the alternative project(s), and/or a research/professional development allowance.

Competition

A call for applications to the initiative was made in March 2015, and 98 applications were received. Applications were adjudicated by a multi-disciplinary panel of faculty members, and were assessed on scholarly rigour, potential for positive impact on the public interest, potential for integration of non-traditional scholarship into the dissertation, and general fit with the initiative. Most applicants identified a non-academic partner/ collaborator.

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Thirty-six students from across all major disciplines were funded, and an additional three unfunded students were also invited to participate in the program. A great diversity of partners were identified by the students,



including NGOs, government agencies and ministries, community groups, and private companies from around the world.

Among the projects were: a proposal to develop a training program for humanitarian workers leading from a Political Science student's research on armed non-state groups and child soldiers; a collaboration with the City of Vancouver to improve the seismic safety of its buildings; and a collaboration with the U.S. White House and

two private companies to explore avenues to improving job satisfaction and employee engagement.

Assessment of the pilot

All students, faculty, and collaborators will be asked to complete a questionnaire at the end of their funding/involvement. Student dissertations and student completion and career outcomes will also be reviewed and evaluated in the context of their scholarly work done as part of the pilot.

Questions, comments, or ideas?



Along with our Public Scholarship Co-Coordinator, [Efe Peker](#), we invite the membership of CAGS to interact with us as we explore new territory (at least at UBC) in deliberately supporting broad, career-relevant, socially purposeful and integrated approaches to PhD education. We look forward to reporting through CAGS on our challenges, successes and take-forward learnings over the coming two years.

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