Transferable Skills for Ph.D. Students:
Pedagogical Shifts and Culture Change

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the growing trend for the inclusion of transferable skills development in graduate programs. While there are no universally accepted criteria for what constitutes transferable skills, there is increasing consensus, and increasing experience with initiatives internationally. The experience to date in Canada is more limited but there are promising leading examples. If, however, the potential of transferable skills development initiatives is to fully realized, innovators must be cognizant of a range of challenges and barriers. I conclude by discussing key challenges, including leadership, resources and institutional resistance.

Context: The Need for Transferable Skills

In most university graduate programs, it has long been a standard or traditional assumption that the main purpose or mission is to help students acquire academic skills, usually defined as skills related to scholarly research. Historically, the underlying premise of graduate studies, for the most part, has been that graduates will pursue academic careers. Graduate programs that are explicitly professional in nature – for example, nursing – have always been the exception to this rule. Nevertheless, it is generally true that the predominant focus of graduate programs has tended strongly to be the acquisition of academic competencies. At the same time, it has always been clear that many graduates do not end up pursuing academic careers, and it appears that this is increasingly the case. This raises a question that is increasingly topical and important: if it is obvious that many graduates will end up in careers in sectors other than academia (government, industry, not-for-profit, consulting, etc.), how can graduate programs evolve and change to address this reality? This challenge is now commonly referred to as the need for "transferable skills" or sometimes as "graduate student professional development".

The need for transferable skills is most acute at the Ph.D. level. There is mounting evidence that the majority of contemporary Ph.D. graduates will not be appointed to tenure-stream university positions [1,2]. This, however, is not a straightforward reality, but rather a complex phenomenon that requires explanation and qualification. First, there is a general lack of data pertaining to the placement of Ph.D. graduates in tenure-stream positions. The data are usually anecdotal rather than comprehensive. For example, a particular university, faculty or program may track their graduates and report those who are hired in full time university jobs, which may result in a reliable picture. University associations and governments will sometimes collect and report such data, which may produce a reliable enough estimate, for example, that 1 in 3 Ph.D. graduates will secure a tenure-stream position within 5 years of graduating. Of course, there will never be any numbers that are universally reliable; the numbers will always be fluid, they will always vary by discipline, by region, by country, etc. It will probably never be possible to produce an accurate picture. Nevertheless, taken together, the anecdotal evidence point clearly to the conclusion that, in global terms, the majority of Ph.D. graduates will not be hired in tenure stream university careers. Among my colleagues at TransDoc, a consortium of universities working together to develop transferable skills for graduate students, the consensus number is approximately 25%, although, according to some reports, the number is less than 5% in some countries [3]. Paradoxically, enrollment in Ph.D. programs has, if anything, increased dramatically over the past generation, and it is now as common for students to complete doctoral degrees as it was for their ancestors to complete masters, and, generations ago, undergraduate degrees. The co-existence of these two trends points to a growing disconnect between the career realities facing Ph.D. graduates and the education and training that is offered in their programs.

Transferable Skills Development Initiatives

As the work of TransDoc [3] indicates, there is considerable activity underway amongst European universities in developing transferable skills development initiatives for Ph.D. students. In Canada, such initiatives are occurring unevenly to date [for leading examples, 4,5,6,7]. There is no universally shared definition of "transferable skills", but common elements include skills or awareness pertaining to communication, networking, teamwork, project management, time management, presentation skills, entrepreneurship, social responsibility, ethical conduct for professionals, internationalization, globalization and leadership. Learning opportunities often arise through local resources; for example, a two week transferable skills course delivered by TransDoc at SUNY Buffalo in 2012 included a field trip to a local hospital that is renowned for its research [8].

To date, a few Canadian universities have positioned themselves as leaders in transferable skills development, and have created high profile, well advertised centralized programs. Other universities offer transferable skills through existing resources such as career services centers, but without the profile or branding that is more common among the leading institutions. Meanwhile, most Canadian universities offer decentralized, less coordinated transferable skills training, through individual faculties or departments, which means that some Ph.D. students benefit more than others in gathering skills that extend beyond traditional academic training. At the latter universities, Ph.D. students who wish to develop transferable skills would typically have to search for offerings that are scattered and may be available through libraries, writing centers, career centers, or a variety of other programs or resources. Accordingly, the leading institutions have recognized that transferable skills development, in order to be offered effectively, requires commitment, priority, profile and coordination. My own university, though its Faculty of Graduate Studies, is currently conducting a needs analysis, and is likely to move forward with recommendations for centralized services in transferable skills development. Overall, the experience to date shows that transferable skills development is very much a work-in-progress, evolving rapidly, with an increasing number of best practice examples to draw from. There is however, considerable catching up that needs to take place. A number of forces, including globalization, shifting career markets, and demographic change, have converged to lend increasing urgency for Ph.D. students to be better prepared for non-academic futures in a variety of fast-evolving job sectors. Moreover, it is increasingly prevalent that graduates will in practice change careers more than once, and have "hybrid" careers that combine work in public, private and other sectors.

Implications and Challenges for Universities and Graduate Programs

Having discussed the need for transferable skills development for Ph.D. students, and having highlighted some trends at Canadian universities in this regard, I would now like to reflect on some of the challenges that may be encountered as institutions seek to move forward with initiatives. Some of these challenges are obvious and easily surmountable, while others are more daunting and fundamental in nature.

The Magnitude of the Challenge

My exposure to the work of TransDoc has made me appreciate the enormity of the challenge associated with transferable skills development. I began by assuming that the challenge was "only" for universities to offer skills development learning opportunities for Ph.D. students. I realized gradually that this is connected to everything else (policy, funding, pedagogy, curriculum, external forces, etc.). Indeed, those who are experienced, and have immersed themselves in the challenge, note that it is literally about "reforming graduate education programs", not simply adding transferable skills content. Therefore, I believe that it is very important to not underestimate the magnitude of the challenges that will be involved in the transition to a different philosophy of education.

Leadership

It is clear to me that every successful initiative in transferable skills development to date has been largely attributable to a "champion" or a team or network of champions whose vision and sustained efforts lead to success. These champions, in addition to invariably being excellent educators and scholars, share a

critical perspective on graduate education, and see the opportunities that arise as the landscape changes. They come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Some have extensive administrative experience, others do not. The key commonality, I have observed, is that they are all very much "in touch" with graduate students, and they understand the need to balance traditional education with new, experimental approaches.

Resources, Coordination, Avoiding Duplication

As discussed earlier, many universities have transferable skills development offerings that are not well coordinated, and in many cases there may be considerable duplication in efforts and resources. While there are advantages to decentralized approaches, in a context of constrained resources, there is a clear need to coordinate and centralize efforts. The branding that can accompany centralization is often quite important and it is a common strategy of institutions that are leaders in transferable skills.

Resistance and Culture Change

Resistance to increased integration of transferable skills development in graduate programs is common, and can be manifested in a variety of ways. Many professors, for example, see little incentive in modifying their teaching content. Others, even if they perceive the need, may lack the knowledge to include transferable skills. Beyond this, however, there is, to a certain degree, an entrenched belief that the core (or sole) purpose of graduate education is to prepare students for careers in academia. This is sometimes referred to as "cloning", a process in which supervisors attempt to reproduce their contributions in their graduates, on the assumption that they will proceed to university careers, despite considerable evidence that most will not. It can be very difficult to challenge these deeply entrenched perspectives and values and to change academic cultures, and it takes powerful leadership to do so successfully. Finally, there is another, ideologically-driven form of resistance which can surface in response to transferable skills initiatives: resistance to the ostensible "commodification" of education. According to this view, the purpose of university education should not be to help students find jobs and careers – it should be to educate them to think critically. In my view, these goals have never been mutually exclusive, and now, in the rapidly changing context of graduate studies, they are linked inextricably. The world needs, more than ever, critical thinkers who can address complex economic, social, ecological and political problems. But in order for these critical thinkers to be effective, they must ultimately find employment.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to capture some of the important challenges, issues and tensions surrounding the transition to a future in which the inclusion of transferable skills will be increasingly common in graduate programs. The movement is gathering experience and momentum, and appears to be reaching a point of critical mass, where what was once leading edge and experimental is becoming the new normal.

References

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