

Stakeholder Summary

Pilot program attempts to collect meaningful outcomes data for graduate students

As the number of graduate students in Ontario increases, so does the desire for reliable data about the experience of these students and their employment outcomes. A new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) examines a pilot program at Western University using surveys to collect outcomes data from graduating doctoral students and recent graduate program alumni.

Project Description

The study is based on the findings of an exit survey of students completing a PhD program at Western University between September, 2013 and April, 2014 and an alumni survey of Western University graduates who completed a graduate degree between January, 2008 and August, 2013. Both surveys were distributed by email in mid-December, 2013. The surveys asked questions about demographics, program information, quality of program, career preparedness and employment outcomes.

Findings

The response rates to the two pilot surveys were low and highlight the need for outreach efforts to increase the number of surveys completed so the data pool is large enough to draw meaningful conclusions. Only 16% (25 of 156) of graduating students and nearly 9% (135 of 1,546) of alumni completed the surveys. In both cases the highest response rates came from graduates of health science and medicine, arts, humanities and social science programs. To boost response rates in future surveys, the authors recommend a system of automated reminder emails and timing surveys to avoid periods of high email traffic and peak holiday times.

While the low response rates mean results must be interpreted with caution, the surveys did indicate that students graduating from a doctoral program felt their education best prepared them for careers in academia and provided the least preparation for industry, business or entrepreneurship.

Approximately three quarters of those who completed the graduating students survey had already begun a job search while still in their academics program and about 40% had secured employment. The respondents also felt their program achieved the desired learning outcomes, with the exception of preparing them to become entrepreneurs.

The alumni results showed that approximately 5% of respondents were unemployed, with the strongest employment rates found among those who graduated between 2008 and 2010. Of those employed, 95% indicated their job was related to their graduate education and 90% felt satisfied or very satisfied with their employment. The majority of respondents (58%) were working for a university, with 25% citing their job title as assistant/associate/tenure-stream professor. Health care was the second most common employer with 16% of respondents. Alumni from health science and medicine programs

reported a higher rate of full-time employment (83%) than those from the arts, humanities and social science programs (71%).

Across all disciplines, doctoral alumni indicated that the activities that best prepared them for their careers were presenting seminars or research, writing a major paper or thesis, writing manuscripts, preparing conference presentations, collaborating with faculty members and collaborating as part of a team. Similar to the graduating students, alumni felt their program did not prepare them to be entrepreneurs.

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