Meaningful Employment for Humanities and Social Sciences Graduates

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to better understand the employment trajectories, barriers, and opportunities facing Social Sciences and Humanities graduates in Ontario, and explore the various approaches and efforts that have been previously attempted in addressing this issue.

Social Science and Humanities (SSH) students are often subject to caricatures of the utility of their earned degree in a job market that ostensibly favours Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students in employment roles. It is true that, upon graduation, STEM graduates face a job market where, in the years immediately following graduation, they are rewarded with higher earnings than SSH graduates. Yet, graduate earnings is one dimension of the differentiated employment trajectories of STEM and SSH graduates. This caricature is particularly well-captured by a report out of the Education Policy Research Initiative at the University of Ottawa, who suggest:

We are often confronted with the now familiar barista trope – the suggestion (even assumption) that going to university, or college, particularly in a non-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) field of study, is a waste of time and will leave graduates stuck in a job with low earnings and little opportunity for career advancement.

(Finnie et al., 2016)

In part, the references to differences between STEM and SSH graduates’ employment outcomes as “caricatures” emanates from the tendency of literature on educational employment outcomes to focus on level of education (Robst, 2007). In other words, in evaluating the nature of employment outcomes in an educational context, the analysis has focused on “vertical” differences (i.e., between levels of education) as opposed to “horizontal” differences (i.e., among graduates from the same level of education). So, segmenting the study of employment outcomes by no high school graduation, high school graduation, postsecondary education (PSE), master’s, doctoral education, and so on, sheds important light on how educational attainment impacts graduates’ experience in the labour market. However, such segmentation does little to help us understand the multitude of students’ and graduates’ experiences within a given level of education. As such, this report will explore intra-level employment outcomes, by focusing on the experience of SSH students and graduates through the transition from education to the workforce.

Scope and Definitions

First, while every effort was made to find and utilize data and analysis focused on SSH students and graduates in Ontario, the dearth of data in certain areas necessitated widening the scope of analysis to pan-Canadian data. In fact, one of the major outcomes of this report is recognition of the need for more data on the Ontario context, specifically.

Second, the emphasis on the data used and analyzed in this report was placed on students and graduates at the undergraduate (i.e., bachelor of arts) level. This decision was made due to the reality that, on the whole, the undergraduate level represents the majority of PSE graduates in Ontario, and have attracted an asymmetrically large proportion of concern, speculation, and derision as to the issues facing their successful
transition into the workforce. Thus, although there is some attention paid to the master’s and doctoral levels of achievement, the focus of this report is on the undergraduate student and graduate experience.

Third, the decision was made to focus on universities in the identification, collection, and analysis of data on education-employment transitions and characteristics. Many colleges in Ontario offer programs and courses that consistently align with SSH programs and courses across universities. However, in most cases, these programs represent a small component of the colleges’ overall program offering, and the availability of data and analysis on these programs unfortunately makes their wholesale, seamless inclusion in this report’s scope and methods difficult.

The final consideration is, of course, what comprises a SSH graduate. In the context of this report, SSH graduates will be identified as graduates who have successfully completed their degree in subjects that conform to Statistics Canada’s definition of Humanities and Social Sciences. For the Humanities, Statistics Canada identified the following subjects:

- Aboriginal and foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics
- English language and literature/letters
- Liberal arts and sciences, general studies, and humanities
- Medieval and renaissance studies
- Holocaust and related studies
- Classical and ancient studies
- Maritime studies
- Philosophy and religious studies
- Theology and religious vocations
- History
- French language and literature/letters

The following subjects are identified, by Statistics Canada, as following under the Social Sciences umbrella:

- Anthropology
- Archaeology
- Criminology
- Demography and population studies
- Economics
- Geography and cartography
- International relations and national security studies
- Political science and government
- Sociology
- Urban studies/affairs
- Sociology and anthropology
- Rural sociology

While these lists are unlikely to engender universal agreement or endorsement, they are nevertheless good starting points for further refining a definition of SSH, if need be. Further, much of the literature that focuses
on graduates’ outcomes sources their data from Statistics Canada. As a result, using similar definitions might promote a consistency across analyses in this space.

This report will proceed in five main stages. First, it is important to take a largely objective look at the transition SSH graduates face from education to the workforce. In the second section, the intentions and preferred pathways of SSH graduates will be discussed. Third, the potential barriers to SSH graduates’ successful employment transition will be identified. Fourth, the discussion will shift to what kinds of opportunities exist for SSH students to prepare for entry into the workforce. Finally, the perception of employers will be analyzed with, when possible, specific reference to SSH students and graduates.

Section 1: SSH grads’ employment pathways, efforts, and outcomes 1-5 years after graduation

In order to consider what action might be taken to more effectively integrate SSH graduates into the workforce, it is important to understand the current employment trends among SSH graduates. Fortunately, there is an abundance of data on the employment SSH graduates take up after they have completed their degree. In particular, the following variables will be analyzed:

- SSH graduates’ employment rate and their engagement with the labour market
- the nature of their role (full-time versus part-time);
- the relatedness of their employment to their educational program of study;
- the relatedness of their employment to the skills developed during their time at a PSE;
- compensation; and,
- further education.

One of the principal caricatures that has emerged in describing SSH graduates is the notion “that graduates lack the skills to be successful in the labour market and are more likely than graduates of programs that emphasize applied skills to end up in low-paying, lows skilled jobs” (Edge et al., 2018). This perception has permeated into a point of near-satire, with one notable Canadian columnist suggesting “I hate to say this, but if your degree is in sociology, psych, art history or much else on the soft side, you are a dime a dozen. Have you heard of supply and demand? Sorry! You’re on the wrong side of the equation” (Wente, 2012). Despite the barrage of negative outlooks and perceptions of SSH degrees in popular culture, what does the data suggest on these key indicators of SSH graduates’ outcomes?

SSH graduates’ employment rate and their engagement with the labour market

Across the 21 post-secondary institutions that participate in the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Ontario University Graduate Survey (OUGS), there is rich data for understanding the employment trajectory of SSH students following graduation. Further, this data is particularly helpful to this report due to the fact the survey exclusively samples Ontario students and graduates. The OUGS, which is prepared in cooperation with Ontario’s PSEs, is administered to all graduates up to two years after graduation, with the primary purpose of tracking PSE graduates’ employment outcomes and informing policy development and analysis at the ministerial level. The OUGS is administered by two contracted
organizations--CCI Research Inc. and Forum Research Inc.--who are provided with the names, student numbers, contact information, university program, gender, and language of communication by universities. These organizations then attempt to make contact with graduates (by email and/or physical mail) for the purposes of encouraging survey response. To maximize the response rate, the survey can be administered online or by paper response. The 2013 graduating cohort had approximately 84,500 graduates, of which 78,594 were surveyed, with 34,011 responding to this survey. As a result, there was a slightly over 40% response rate (MTCU, 2014).

MTCU does not aggregate Social Science and Humanities into a single degree category, so the data on these two faculties are piecemeal, though no less useful. The data track graduates’ employment trajectories at two intervals: six-months and two-years after graduation. For the purposes of topicality, the most useful and comprehensive data for this report emanates from the OUGS surveys that were administered for the 2013 graduating class, with data collected between November 2015 and March 2016. However, in January 2018, preliminary data for the 2014 graduating cohort was released, which can be used to supplement the more granular and robust data from previous years, while also adding up-to-date data for certain indicators (Council of Ontario Universities, 2018). For students following a four-year degree path, the data covers students in the 2009 intake cohort. This is, of course, a shortcoming in the available data, given that many students do not complete their degree in the Social Sciences or Humanities within the prescribed time-frame (Higher Education Strategy Associates, 2012), nor is the data as current as desired. It is uncertain, at this moment, whether a prolonged educational tenure beyond the expected timeframe has a positive, negative, or insignificant impact on post-graduation employment outcomes.

After six months of degree completion, graduating students in the Humanities from the 2013 intake cohort had an employment rate of 87.46% province-wide, with a range from 83.16% (York University and University of Waterloo) to 93.33% (Trent University). After two years, however, the employment rate for Humanities students improves. Province-wide, the employment rate for Humanities students increases to 91.88% two years after graduation, with a range of 88.1% (University of Windsor) to 100% (Algoma University), although the latter figure likely indicates a small sample size or statistical error.

For graduates from Social Sciences programs, the data indicate that graduates have a weaker employment rate six months after graduation, in comparison to Humanities graduates. However, after two years post-graduation, Social Sciences graduates eclipse the employment rate of Humanities graduates. This is an interesting phenomenon--weaker entry into the workforce, but quick recovery two years out--that deserves further research. Province-wide for the 2013 intake cohort, the six-month employment rate of Social Sciences graduates is 85.18%, ranging from a low of 80.22% (UOIT) to 95.56% (Nipissing). After two years, though, Social Science graduates face an employment rate of 92.57%.

This begs the subsequent question of how Social Sciences and Humanities graduates’ employment outcomes fare in comparison to their peers with degrees in other programs. Provincialy, the 2013 intake graduating cohort had a six-month employment rate of 86.98%, while the employment rate grew to 93.56% two years post-graduation, as shown in Figure 1 below. This suggests that, six months out of graduation, Humanities graduates slightly exceed the employment rate of their entire graduating cohort; Social Science graduates, however, are below the average by approximately 2%. Two years after graduation, however, both Social
Sciences and Humanities graduates slip below the provincial average employment rate of their peers (93.56%).

What is interesting to note, as the figure below shows, is that the average employment rates of SSH graduates and graduates of all other programs have, since 2003 at least, typically followed a similar trend. Although there has been fluctuation between SSH and non-SSH graduates over the period covered the data, the macro-economic and labour market forces have demonstrably impacted all graduates in relatively uniform fashion. For example, there is a very clear drop in employment rate among all graduates--irrespective of course of study--resulting from the onset of the 2008 recession. Despite this conformity to larger labour market trends, the aforementioned analysis has demonstrated that there is also nuanced variability in employment outcomes between programs of study.

*The Nature of SSH Graduates' Employment*

One of documented trends of the contemporary workforce landscape has been the proliferation of part-time, contract-based, or otherwise precarious employment opportunities (Law Commission of Ontario, 2017). The corollary to this is that the prevalence of full-time, permanent positions have not been as predominantly enjoyed by SSH graduates in recent years. The data indicate that there is, indeed, a modest shift among today’s PSE graduates to precarious work (Fong, 2018). While there has certainly been concerns raised about the impact of this ostensibly broader workforce trend on PSE graduates, there is also evidence that some PSE students might actually prefer the flexibility and variance that might not be feasible in a permanent, full-time employment arrangement. Nevertheless, it might be expected that a significant portion of SSH graduates would be employed in a part-time context, whether by volition or by necessity. The data support this trend more broadly (i.e., degree-indiscriminate), especially as employers have indicated a growing propensity towards an ‘agile workforce (Randstad, 2017).
Among Humanities graduates in 2013 who secured employment six months after graduation, slightly under 60% of graduates were employed in a full-time position, while 27.75% were employed part-time. For Social Science graduates, slightly more graduates were employed full-time (61.55%), while noticeably less were in a part-time job (23.51%). After two years post-graduation, there is an expected uptick in both Humanities and Social Sciences graduates’ full-time employment, vis-à-vis part-time employment. For Humanities graduates, 69.7% of employed graduates were in full-time positions, while 22.06% were in part-time positions. For Social Sciences students, there was a similarly marked disproportionate trend to full-time employment:
71.67% employed full-time, while 20.7% of graduates employed in part-time positions two years after graduation (MAESD, 2017).

It is also interesting to note that, among both part- and full-time graduates of SSH programs, there is a theoretically high rate of mobility. Statistics Canada acknowledges that SSH graduates are able to exercise more job-fluidity on the basis of their skill transferability, which can be regarded as both positive (greater opportunities afforded by mobility) and negative (job instability)(Giles and Drewes, 2001). It would be valuable for future research to consider the perceived mobility of SSH graduates, and the extent to which this mobility is exercised.

**Relatedness**

Among the caricature of the 21st century university graduate (especially in the post-2008-2009 recession cohorts), the notion of distal connection between the nature of work vis-à-vis their earned degree subject figure prominently. As such, another dimension to the outcomes of SSH graduates is the commensurability of their earned degrees with the nature of the work they are performing. In this instance, the question is not about the relatedness of their current employment to their program of study, but rather the relatedness between the level of education they have attained and the level of education required for their employment.

In an analysis of data performed by Statistics Canada, it was revealed that SSH graduates represent among the highest shares of PSE graduates who are overqualified for their current role--whereby overqualified workers refers to PSE graduates working in occupations requiring a high-school education (or less). Among a Canada-wide sample of PSE graduates between 25 and 34 years of age (keeping in mind the mean age of undergraduate graduates is approximately 25)(Dale, 2010), 24.7% of graduates from programs in “Social and behavioural sciences and law” and 32.5% of Humanities graduates reported they were employed in positions requiring a high-school education or less (Uppal and LaRochelle-Cote, 2014). These represent the highest overqualification rates across the surveyed fields of study.

Furthermore, the Parliamentary Budget Officer (PBO) has recognized the prevalence, and costs, associated with overqualification, which they recognize as occurring when “an individual is considered ‘overqualified’ if his or her highest educational attainment exceeds that usually required for their occupation” (Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2015). According to the PBO, the phenomenon of over-qualification has proliferated in Canada, increasing nationally among 25- to 34-year olds from 32% in 1991 to 40% in 2014 (Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, 2015). This figure was particularly exacerbated following the 2008-2009 recession. Interestingly, the PBO indicated that their data and research suggest two factors graduates identify when asked about the factors leading to their over-qualification: they could not find the job they wanted and/or could not wait for the job they wanted.

Unfortunately, overqualification is not without consequence: notwithstanding the obvious impact on lower earnings (Statistics Canada, 2000), overqualification also negatively impacts workers’ productivity (Korpi & Tahlin, 2009). As such, prescriptions for remedying SSH graduates’ tepid entry into the workforce ought to centre on graduates’ entry into the workforce must address the commensurability of graduates’ skill and subject levels with the skill/subject levels demanded by employers. The costs of skill misalignment are significant, and affect manifold stakeholders. For graduates themselves, the absence of opportunity to use
their skills acquired in PSE can lead to an erosion of these skills over time. Furthermore, there is a psychological cost associated with misalignment of graduates’ skills and their employment circumstance, especially in situations where graduates pursued a degree requiring highly-specialized, job-specific training.

It is important to resist the temptation, however, of inferring a univariate deterministic relationship between graduates’ program of study and their post-graduate employment experience. In other words, while it is likely that the program in which graduates have studies matters has important consequences on their employment prospects post-graduation, there are likely other factors at play simultaneously. For example, many graduates (Ferguson & Wang, 2014) decide to pursue postgraduate education after their degree completion, for the purposes of “increasing educational requirements to meet demand from employers, personal interest or difficulties in the labour market”, (Ferguson & Wang, 2014) among other factors. Further, graduates’ economic hardship is an important consideration. According to Hausdorf (2007), students facing heightened economic hardship prior to graduation leads to a more feverish job-search effort. In turn, this study also found that, after six months post-graduation, graduates facing economic hardship demonstrated a propensity to accepting employment considered by those graduates to be incommensurate with the quality of employment they perceive as attainable vis-a-vis their degree. In short, there are clearly multiple factors affecting employment outcomes, though the program is certainly one such factor, as we will now see.

There are two particular types of “match” between skills and employment that are identified in the literature. First, there is subject-matter match, which represents the knowledge that graduates have attained through a specific course of study. Second, there is a university-skills match, which encompasses the broader set of skills and competencies that graduates attain by virtue of their higher-education, regardless of the specific discipline or program they specialize in. It might be reasonably hypothesized that graduates from highly-technical, job-specific programs (such as engineering or nursing) would have a higher incidence of subject-matter match than graduates from less vocational programs with a clearly-delineated employment path (such as sociology or political science). This report will now take a look at how SSH graduates rate their subject-matter and university-skills match after graduation.

Subject-Matter Match

In terms of specific relatedness from program-of-study to their employment at the time, SSH graduates offer shockingly low appraisals. For Humanities graduates, just 29% of full-time workers express a closely- or somewhat-closely linkage to their program of study after six-months. For Social Science graduates, the figure is 32%. After two years in the labour force, the numbers rise to 42% and 45% for Humanities and Social Science graduates, respectively. Troublingly, after two years post-graduation, 26% of SSH graduates indicate that their current full-time employment is “not related at all” to their program of study at university. This falls well below the average of 59% of graduates from all programs across Ontario, who expressed that their full-time employment was “closely or somewhat-related” to their program of study at a PSE institution. Figure 4 visualizes these marked disparities.
For SSH graduates, the relationship between program choice and career choices can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the skills acquired throughout their degrees do not, in many cases, prepare students for a single career path with defined career progression. This provides graduates with an expanded ambit of career trajectories than might be provided by more career-specific (and, often, highly-technical) programs of study. Thus, SSH graduates are exposed to a wider range of career prospects that do not have high barriers to entry from an educational or accreditation standpoint, and are not as constrained in their career prospects.

On the other hand, though, the non-vocational nature of many SSH degrees might suggest that graduates are competing in a job market where employers do not perceive or recognize a value-add from SSH degrees. If students have not been trained and imparted skills that prepare them for workplace-specific transferability, employers might infer that the value of a SSH graduate to the workforce is not self-evident. This would support the notion that “graduates from applied education programs establish and accomplish more focused educational and career goals, while graduates from liberal education programs establish broader educational and career goals” (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006). Of course, this is one of the central dilemmas of this report.

### University-Skills Match

In addition to the attainment of subject-specific skills in their program of study, SSH graduates also develop skills that are attained by many university students across all faculties. For SSH graduates, the relatedness of skills developed through their PSE studies paints a troubling picture. However, it is important to remember that this data attempts to capture the relatedness of skills acquired in PSE across all programs, rather than industry or job-specific skills. As such, the main skills the survey considers include cross-disciplinary, subject-indiscriminate skills such as critical thinking, analytical reasoning, communication, and problem-solving. Nevertheless, this data is still important as it captures SSH graduates' perceptions of the relatedness of their educational experience, as a whole, to their employment context. In other words, it
would be difficult to isolate the skills gained during their specific degree studies from the skills gained during their university tenure (which, practically-speaking, may very well be a distinction without difference).

For Humanities graduates in the 2013 convocating cohort, 41% of graduates in a full-time employment position expressed that their current role was “closely or somewhat related” to the skills developed at university. For Social Science graduates in the same cohort, the figure was slightly higher, at 43%. Across all programs for which data is collected, the figure is 55%. As a result, the data suggest that after six months in the labour force, SSH graduates in full-time positions are not in skill-correspondent positions, compared to their peers from other program background. After two years since graduation, the numbers improve. For Humanities graduates, the skill-relatedness of their full-time position rises to 57%, with Social Science graduates rising as well, up to 57%.

**Earnings**

It is well-documented that graduates from PSE institutions face earning premiums in the labour market (Bergin & Parker, 2009). After 40 years in the labour force (and therefore capturing the vast majority of a graduates' working life), an Ontario graduate with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn a premium of almost $770,000, when compared to Ontarians without a baccalaureate. For a further degree beyond the bachelor level, that earnings premium balloons to almost $1.2 million. These are significant compensatory figures that, no doubt, figure prominently in the motivation for students to pursue PSE. Yet, despite the promise of long-term income premia for undergraduate degree holders, there is considerable variation in compensation between different programs. In data tracking graduates' income six-months and two-years post-graduation, we know that these variations immediately manifest. After six-months and two-years since graduation, Humanities graduates in full-time positions earn, on average, $31,297 and $38,305, respectively. For Social Sciences graduates, these correspondent incomes are $34,983 and $41,930. SSH graduates fall below the full-time salary for all university graduates in Ontario, who on average earn $41,839 and $49,170 after six-months and two-years post-graduation, respectively. Over a longer time horizon, however, there are some interesting trends for SSH graduates. Particularly, when compared to STEM graduates, there is evidence that SSH graduates have a greater income stability, although “career stability can come at a price,” namely absolute annual earnings (Edge et al., 2016).

This, of course, points to broader cross-disciplinary trends of employment earnings, as well as the risk that students of different programs face in their employment prospects. According to a pan-Canadian report from CIBC, “while those [employment] data hint at stronger average outcomes in specialized technical and professional fields, a look at the dispersion of earnings across fields of study shows that there is a much greater risk of falling into a lower-income category for graduates of humanities and social sciences, with a limited risk for students of health, engineering or business” (Tal & Enenajor, 2013). In fact, the data used for this report suggest that SSH graduates are second only to Psychology graduates in the share of university graduates earning less than the median income in Canada. Despite SSH graduates underperforming in income accumulation when compared to graduates of other programs, the earnings premium for SSH graduates (as PSE graduates) will still, on average, exceed Ontarians with no post-secondary education.
Further Education

Of course, for many students in Ontario and Canada, the bachelor degree is not the terminal point of their formal post-secondary education. It is well-documented that further education beyond the undergraduate level is positively-correlated to higher-earnings (Berger & Parkin, 2009). Furthermore, pursuing a degree beyond an undergraduate can mitigate the risk of overqualification in the workplace. The extent of asymmetry between undergraduate degree holders’ overqualification and their master’s and doctoral peers is significant: between ages 25 and 34, higher degree holders are up to half as likely to be overqualified in their employment than those with a terminal bachelor degree.

There is data to suggest that graduates from programs in the Humanities across Canada are among the most likely educational groups to pursue higher education after graduation. When compared to Humanities graduates, Social Sciences graduates are 35% less likely to pursue post-graduate education, while that number rises to 61% for graduates from engineering and technology programs (Fenesi & Sana, 2015). Other data from Statistics Canada’s National Graduate Survey, however, suggests that both Social Sciences and Humanities graduates are considerably more likely to pursue further education than all other graduates. Specifically, three years after graduation, 60% of Social Sciences students pursued further education while 61% of Humanities graduates did the same. For all graduates, however, slightly under 50% pursued further education (Edge et al, 2018). In considering the integration of SSH graduates into the workforce, then, it is important to consider whether the decision of SSH graduates to pursue further education is driven mostly by subject interest, expected future income premia, weak experience in the entry-level market, or some evenly-distributed combination thereof.

Section 2: SSH grads’ intentions/preferred pathways post-graduation

With the materially significant costs of education, along with the opportunity costs associated with delaying entry into the workforce to complete one’s degree(s), it is presumed that students expect a return on their investment after graduation. Further, we can reasonably posit that graduates from programs in nursing, optometry, and electrical engineering expect that their graduation will lead to employment in a relatively well-defined career entry point. For SSH graduates, as discussed earlier, there is little in the way of a defined or natural entry point into the workforce, and no governing authority or regulatory body encompassing SSH graduates (as a whole) in their post-graduation professional lives.

For SSH graduates, then, what do they seek or expect from their degrees once ready to enter the workforce? Unfortunately, the data is simply not robust enough for making valid generalizable inferences into what these graduates prefer or intend to pursue post-graduation. This is one of the major shortcomings in the literature on PSE outcomes in Canada. While there is abundant data on the employment rate, unemployment rate, overqualification levels, compensation levels, and other readily quantifiable variables, the data has not engaged with consideration of what SSH are looking for out of their education.

What possible variables can, and should, be considered for future analysis centreing on this question? First, we can reasonably suggest that the majority students in the Ontario PSE system intend on pursuing and succeeding in gaining employment after graduation (either from their undergraduate or higher education).
Post-secondary education has long been suggested as one of the most critical factors in promoting socio-economic mobility, and many students undeniably pursue a higher education for the purposes of pursuing and securing employment opportunities that would not be available in the absence of such education. This intention has been sustained by research; according to Gunderson and Krashinsky, “prospective students do choose fields of study in part at least on the basis of earnings they can expect to receive in those fields. Furthermore, earnings expectations formed around the time they are applying are more influential than earnings expectations based on years further away from that time, although both generally have an impact on the choice of field of study” (Gunderson & Krashinsky, 2009). Interestingly, this research suggests that students’ choice of program highly corresponds to perceived earnings at the time of application, not from a long-term field of vision.

Earnings potential, however, is not the sole factors that informs students’ choice of program in post-secondary studies. If earnings potential was the exclusive consideration students’ took into account when selecting their choice of program, the enrollment in SSH programs would not be as robust as it currently is, and STEM programs would likely see considerably higher enrolment rates. Thus, while earnings potential is an important consideration for students pursuing post-secondary education, there are other non-pecuniary variables that enter the calculus students make when choosing their major. One of the primary variables that informs students’ decision of program is perceived ability of the student to succeed in the given subject area (Wiswall and Zafar, 2014). This is not a surprising revelation, given that skill levels across the competencies and interest levels for subjects studied prior to post-secondary education are not evenly distributed. As a result, students deciding on their program of study at a PSE will base their decision, in part, on their perceptions of their ability to be academically successful in the given program. It should not come as a surprise, then, that students who perceive themselves to be particularly astute in the “hard” sciences will pursue majors in STEM fields, while students who believe they are more competent in the “soft” sciences will gravitate toward SSH programs.

Despite data supporting the suggestion that students will base their program decisions on earnings potential and perceived ability, there is evidence that the salient variable in this decision might be neither. Wiswall and Zafar (2014) argue that, based on their economic modelling, the most important variables students consider in selecting their major is “taste”, which includes the enjoyability of coursework and non-financial aspects of one’s job. So, as students are making decisions about their program of study (which, as we have seen through the data, have significant correlates to many aspects of employment after graduation), the extent to which students perceive their enjoyment and engagement with the subject matter might be the single-most important factor students consider in making this decision. The implications of this finding are significant, as are the opportunities for furthering this line of research. For instance, the roots and development of one’s tastes are not explicitly delineated or traced. We do not know, for example, if a student’s taste for SSH or STEM programs is a product of innate differences between students, or have been fostered through social and educational interactions. Regardless of how students’ tastes for programs are developed, this finding importantly encourages us to shift the discussion of program choice and expected outcome from a strictly pecuniary “return-on-investment” angle, and introduce more subjective evaluative components that are actually informing student decisions.

When discussing student expectations from their post-degree outcomes, it is possible that there are multiple factors weighing on students’ minds as they decide, first, to pursue higher education and, second, in what
area to study. In fact, this is a major finding in a survey administered by Academica—a research consultancy focusing on higher education. In their survey, it was revealed that students have an array of goals and outcomes they intend to achieve from their education. Although preparation for a chosen career was the most common student intention, very close second and third priorities were personal/intellectual growth and increasing knowledge/understanding of an academic field, respectively (Skinkle and Glennie, 2016). It is also very interesting to note that the fourth most ubiquitous response by students to this survey was the desire to explore options for their future. The data, therefore, serves as a reminder that “regardless of whether students are certain about their career path, exploration remains a key motive for the majority”, and suggests that “personal development, academic learning, and career exploration should not be separated when we talk about the goals of postsecondary education” (Skinkle and Glennie, 2016).

Beyond this broad understanding of the preferred outcomes-education nexus, the data are not available or sufficient in understanding what specific forms of employment, career-paths, and career growth PSE graduates expect. Further, the granularity of this data by program of study is not readily (or, at least, publicly) available, therefore making it difficult to reliably posit what SSH graduates’ intentions or desired pathways are post-graduation.

There is also an interesting angle that research thus far has not considered. Namely, the intersection of debt levels (especially for more costly programs) and employment intentions needs to be considered. While data exists that covers the debt levels of PSE graduates, it would be interesting to consider the extent to which debt levels amassed during education impact graduates’ career preferences and decisions. This could, in some ways, produce a “chicken and egg” dilemma. Namely, are graduates from more expensive university programs (typically within the “hard” sciences) successful in securing higher-income jobs because of the necessity of re-paying high debt levels, or because the workforce demands for graduates from higher-cost programs are higher than, for instance, SSH graduates? This is an interesting question that deserves further analysis.

This, of course, raises a subsequent question that has been insufficiently grappled in the literature: given the prevalence of data and information suggesting that SSH graduates’ employment rate and earning potential is eclipsed by other programs, why do SSH programs still attract among the highest share of PSE students in Ontario and Canada? This is a question that is unlikely to be univariate, but would rather encompass a variety of factors and variables (past, present, and future) that inform students’ decisions to pursue objectively less-beneficial degrees. A report from CIBC corroborates this conundrum, adding “it’s not clear that students, armed with that knowledge, have been making the most profitable decisions. With the exception of commerce, in the last 10 years we haven’t seen a meaningful influx of students into degrees with more advantageous earnings outcomes” (Tal & Enenajor, 2013). In terms of explanations for the suboptimal pursuit of educational programs leading to more lucrative post-graduation employment outcomes, the authors pose a number of potential explanatory reasons behind this. Namely, “differences in intrinsic traits such as ability and motivation could be a driver. As well, the joy of learning a less-technical subject, rather than a focus on potential future earnings, could be driving the continual increase of students in relatively low-paying fields of study. What’s more, the rising participation of women in higher education may be raising the ranks of students in subject areas where women are disproportionately represented—the arts and social sciences—fields that are typically lower-paying” (Tal & Enenajor, 2013). So, where does this leave our understanding of SSH preferred outcomes after graduation?
Unfortunately, we are left with more questions than answers. While the nascent literature on post-secondary students’ program decisions is beginning to shape our understanding the multiple (and potentially competing) factors that inform this decision, our ability to specifically evaluate SSH students in this question is unfortunately constrained by the deficit of sufficient data. This represents a major opportunity for future research. While there is evidence to suggest that students pursue education at PSE institutions for the purposes of securing employment that would otherwise be unattainable, developing skills and knowledge that they perceive they have an ability in, and pursuing subject matter that they find interesting, this does not cover the full picture.

Section 3: Barriers to SSH grads’ employment efforts post-graduation

While the story in this report so far might appear pessimistic or startling for the employment climate SSH graduates are facing, it still remains true that a PSE degree—whether in SSH or not—provides considerable tangible rewards for graduates. On average, graduates from post-secondary institutions in Ontario have an edge in gaining employment, as evidenced by the employment rate of PSE graduates compared to the rest of the population (Statistics Canada, 2017). Although the education premium is narrowing among PSE and non-PSE graduates in Canada, graduates from PSEs institutions are still more likely to have lower unemployment, employment quality (part-time versus full-time), and income premium. While PSE graduates, as a collective, fare better in the labour market (strictly in terms of gaining employment), this does not indicate that the employment graduates attain is fulfilling, correspondent to their course of study, or commensurate with the skills required for their given job. Perhaps not surprisingly, these kinds of job mismatches are a leading cause of job dissatisfaction, high turnover, and the necessity of further on-the-job training (Boudarbat & Chernoff, 2010).

Any attempt to remedy the employment success of SSH graduates requires thorough consideration of the barriers that these graduates face in gaining employment in the first place. There is a rich literature on factors underlying the variably-successful trajectories graduates face in their transition from education to the workforce. For the purposes of this report, however, there is difficulty in isolating the specific barriers SSH students face in their transition from degree-completion into employment. This is a major opportunity for further research, especially considering that the literature strongly supports the primacy of educational program in predicting the extent to which graduates’ jobs relate to their educational background (Boudarbat, 2012).

Despite the dearth of data and research on specific barriers SSH students face in their transition into the workforce, there are several variables that have been identified and analyzed among PSE graduates as a collective. Though not SSH-specific, it might be helpful to explore some of these variables, with an early consideration of how they may or may not have amplified credence in understanding SSH graduates’ barriers to employment (both absolute employment and education-relevant employment). In particular, we will consider:

- location;
- expectations gap;
Location

One of the major variables that correlate with graduates’ success in transitioning into the workforce is the location in which the graduate is seeking employment. National data from Statistics Canada shed some light on the differentiated employment prospects post-graduation, specifically from an over-qualification standpoint. For instance, the data suggest that university graduates between 25- and 34-years old are more likely to be overqualified in their current position in Canada in three major census metropolitan areas (CMAs): Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver. Furthermore, graduates residing in Calgary, Edmonton, Quebec City, Winnipeg, and Ottawa-Gatineau were demonstrably less likely to be overqualified. However, the highest incidence of likelihood to be overqualified occurs outside of Canada’s major CMAs (Uppal & LaRochelle-Cote, 2015). The data on the nexus between location of work and overqualification point to provincial disparities, as well. Among Canada’s provinces, Ontario has the third-highest incidence of recent graduate overqualification in the workplace, with British Columbia and Manitoba exhibiting the highest predicted probability of overqualification among recent graduates.

Unfortunately, the data on overqualification by location does not offer the kind of granularity that would be needed to make valid inferences on how SSH graduates’ employment outcomes are more, less, or equally impacted by location. However, given the extent to which SSH graduates are disproportionately more likely to be employed in positions with less relatedness to their program and university-gained skills, there is basis to hypothesize that overqualification trends of SSH graduates might conform to the data provided by Statistics Canada. Phrased differently, there does not appear to be a glaring reason why SSH graduates would not conform to the location-based overqualification trends captured by the data.

Further research could identify how SSH graduates’ employment outcomes are shaped by location. To do so, data would need to be collected on where SSH graduates from Ontario universities reside in the years following their graduation; this data would not necessarily need to be city-specific, but rather could focus on rural-urban splits, or CMAs by population size. Another important factor that would be interesting to produce further research on would be the mobility of SSH graduates specifically. We know, for instance, that SSH graduates’ degrees afford a high degree of mobility and transferability, yet we do not know how regularly SSH graduates actually take advantage of this mobility, and relocate (temporarily or permanently) for the purposes of pursuing more desirable employment prospects.

Expectations Gap

It is possible that SSH graduates face a barrier to employment in the form of an “expectations gap”, whereby graduates perceive their skills, experience, and value to the workforce to exceed the availability of employment choices that are available at the time of graduation. As a result, it is possible that SSH graduates decide to “wait it out” in anticipation of more lucrative employment opportunities (which may or may not present themselves), or consider alternative routes if such opportunities do not manifest (such as further education). This, of course, delays the entry of recent graduates into the workforce.
It is uncertain, first of all, whether this phenomenon is actualized in any available date (past or future), and how this expectations gap is reconciled (through ultimately working in a role a graduate is overqualified for, returning to school, etc.). While the data confirm that many SSH graduates do indeed return to higher education for further studies, there is little data that actually indicated why SSH graduates are pursuing this option. One potential explanation is that graduates perceive the difficulty they face in the job market to be a result of insufficient credentials, in which case pursuing a master's or doctoral degree would fill the qualifications gap employers are demanding. Ergo, a graduate who has a difficult time securing a job he/she believes they are qualified for would have a “reality-shock” from an inability to secure this job, and therefore come to reason that further credentials would enhance the graduate's employability. This line of inquiry could potentially offer some insight into why SSH graduates might not immediately enter the workforce, and could potentially offer explanations for other activities and paths SSH graduates undertake.

In addition to an expectations gap in perceived employability, there could be a related phenomenon that deserves further consideration in research and analysis. Namely, there is the possibility that SSH graduates have difficulty, uncertainty, or sub-optimal means of marketing themselves to potential employers. Given the less vocational, career-targeted curriculum that defines many SSH programs at PSEs across Ontario, it is perhaps not a stretch to imagine that students and graduates do not have a solid schema of what skills and competencies they have developed during their education and can contribute to the workforce. If SSH graduates do not have an understanding of how to market themselves within the labour market, then this of course makes it more difficult for graduates to succeed in the marketplace of jobs. As credentials are a proxy for the skills and competencies developed in earning that credential, SSH students must have a satisfactory appraisal of their potential contribution to the marketplace (i.e. how to market themselves to potential employers). Future research and analysis should consider, first, whether this is a discernible phenomenon and, two, the extent to which graduates, employers, and PSEs can contribute to remedying this problem.

**Skills Translation**

One of the important premia gained from a university education is the building of skills, including task-specific skills (often ‘hard skills’) and those that relate more to personal attributes (often referred to as ‘soft skills’). For graduates, it is understandably critical to be able to articulate and market these skills to potential employers, both as a means of demonstrating their competence for a given role and for differentiating themselves from other candidates without these skills. However, there is a two-fold challenge for PSE graduates, and SSH graduates more specifically.

First, it is possible that SSH graduates are not aware of the skills they have developed during their education, and the premium that employers might place on these ‘undiscovered’ skills. Although there is evidence to suggest that all undergraduate degree-holders are not effectively acknowledging and marketing their skills to employers (Martini and Clare, 2014), it is worth exploring whether SSH graduates are particularly burdened with this shortcoming. While ‘hard skills’ might be more easily quantified or otherwise subject to objective appraisal, the ‘soft skills’ that SSH graduates develop need to be effectively appraised for the purposes of explicating these skills to employers. If SSH graduates are not aware of the skills portfolio they have developed during their studies, they are not maximizing their value-proposition to the labour market. As a
result, future research should consider the extent to which SSH graduates, specifically, appraise their skills contribution to the workforce.

Second, SSH graduates might not be particularly effective at marketing and highlighting these skills to employers. If SSH graduates recognize their skills portfolio, they need to furthermore be effective at demonstrating that these skills would make a positive contribution to a potential employer. While many PSE students are consistently told that they are developing critical skills for sustained success in the labour market (and are thus aware of the basket of skills they are developing), the reality is that many students and graduates have difficulty identifying instances where these skills have been actively employed (Martini and Clare, 2014). Students and graduates are able to identify instances of how assignments and projects furthered their understanding of the content in a given area, students/graduates are not as quick to identify these activities as being part of their skill development (Edge et al, 2018). As a result, if students/graduates are aware of the skills they will be able market to the workforce, this is of little help if they are not able to experientially demonstrate the application and honing of these skills. Although it remains to be empirically demonstrated whether SSH students/graduates are disproportionately affected by this, the preponderance of ‘soft skills’ in SSH skills portfolios might tentatively suggest that this is the case. As a report from the Conference Board of Canada suggests, “linkages between skills gained through coursework and potential careers tend to be more clearly articulated in applied programs, giving these students an advantage in the labour market and disadvantaging SSH students who may be competing with students from applied programs for jobs” (Edge et al, 2018).

Overall, the importance that employers place on skills has not demonstrably spilled-over into the importance that PSE students/graduates place on the articulation, marketing, and recognition of their skill development. Given the nature of skills developed and used in SSH curricula—and the challenges that students/graduates face in recognizing and appraising these skills— one could tentatively suggest that SSH graduates might not be maximizing their ‘pitch’ to the labour market.

Previous employment

Among graduates from PSE institutions in Canada, those with previous work experience are at a distinct advantage in pursuing employment. One of the recent changes in the current labour market is the expectation that job candidates will have some form of work experience, even for entry-level positions (Walters & Zarifa, 2008). Of course, this is a curious phenomenon, given that many full-time students pursuing post-secondary education do not have significant work-experience, and especially full-time work experience that would be particularly desirable to prospective employers. How are recent graduates supposed to gain crucial entry-level work experience, they might ask, when entry-level jobs require previous experience they have not gained? The picture just described, however, is not as simple as it seems.

In 2016, just under 50% of job vacancies in Canada required no work experience, and these jobs were particularly likely to be part-time (fewer than 30 hours per week) and temporary in duration (i.e., mostly contract-based work) (Drolet, 2017). With approximately 367,000 job vacancies across the country, what this might suggest is that there is not necessarily be an absolute shortage of entry-level jobs for new graduates. However, when the discussion turns to the quality of these jobs and their relatedness to skills developed from
graduates’ program of study and university experience, the picture might become a bit clearer. For approximately half of the entry-level jobs Statistics Canada tracked, no education was required, with only 20% of those jobs requiring a college diploma or university degree. Among these entry-level jobs, the highest proportions of vacancies are found in natural resources, agriculture and related production, sales and service, manufacturing and utilities, and health. The lowest proportion of entry-level vacancies are found in applied science occupations and management (Drolet, 2017).

As a result, many PSE graduates in Canada are in a position where they must apply for entry-level positions that they are objectively overqualified for, in order to gain necessary experience that is required for more education-appropriate jobs (not to mention to provide a source of income). As previously discussed, the overqualification of SSH graduates is high after six months post-graduation. However, within two years of activity in the labour force, SSH graduates report a higher degree of relatedness between their job and their program- and university-gained skills. What this suggests, then, is that work experience gained prior to SSH students’ graduation is particularly critical in contributing to desired early employment outcomes.

Many SSH students engage in part-time employment during their formal academic studies, with over 60% of undergraduate students using employment to fund their education expenses (Marshall, 2010). Furthermore, students are increasingly working longer hours during the school year, as opposed to just during summer periods or other extended vacant periods in their calendars (Usalcas & Bowlby, 2008). The increasing time students are devoting to non-curricular employment is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, students are earning income that can be applied toward the large (and growing) costs of education, thereby preparing themselves for a reduced debt burden upon graduation and the subsequent years thereafter. On the other hand, though, time that is being spent working a non-curricular job is time that could be spent on academic priorities, and might lead students to reduce their course-load, and therefore extend their duration of education. Resultantly, employment during the academic year could potentially have the consequence of delaying students’ graduation.

Of course, given the absence of compelling data, this is just a sample of the potential barriers SSH graduates face in entering the workforce. There are other, more systemic barriers to employment that must be included in this conversation, such as gender, disability, immigration status (including degrees obtained outside Canada), among other factors. These variables should be the subject of future data collection and research, as this would give us further insight into the extent to which known employment barriers are amplified or softened by the achievement of a SSH degree.

Section 4: SSH career readiness training/preparation prior to graduation

Universities, and especially colleges, have prided themselves on providing opportunities for students to gain critical early work experience during their studies, either through institution-facilitated internship placement, co-operative (co-op) programs, or other forms of non-classroom job-related experience. In large part, co-op programs are offered “to link the theoretical knowledge acquired in the classroom with its practical application in the workforce”, and are helpful in “providing students with the opportunity to alternate between cycles of academic study and workforce participation, where the work performed by coop students is directly related to their field or programme of study” (Walters & Zarifa, 2008). For these
programs to be offered and successfully executed, there is a "buy-in" required from many stakeholders, including students, PSE institutions, employers, and, where applicable, regulatory or governing bodies of specific industries/occupations. For stakeholders involved, though, the value proposition is oftentimes lucrative and self-evident. What do students, post-secondary institutions, and employers gain from engaging with an internship/co-op program?

- For students, they are offered the opportunity to gain on-the-job experience that is marketable and desirable to future employers, as well as developing valuable connections and contacts in their given industry and field. This also gives students and graduates the opportunity to provide material evidence of the skills they have learned and applied in an employment context, beyond utilizing overly broad or generic language (Edge et al, 2018). This can prove particularly useful when searching for full-time, permanent positions following graduation, given that as much as 80% of job vacancies are not publicly advertised or even published (Cheinis & Sproule, 2008). With such a hidden job market capturing the majority of job vacancies in Canada, the importance of building connections and expanding one's network in the field of choice is crucial.

- For employers, the value of hosting an intern or co-op placement comes in the form of low-cost labour from students who have been recognized as either competent or otherwise satisfactory for a placement by the degree-granting institution. Furthermore, if the employer decides that they will have a job vacancy along a timeline that corresponds to the students’ graduation timeline, it is possible that the employer will be able to seamlessly transition the student into the new position. This can save the employer considerable resources in conducting the recruitment, onboarding, and training process by offering a position to someone that has been “vetted” and demonstrated their competence in an on-the-job setting.

- For post-secondary institutions, offering internships and co-op placements to students can serve as a valuable marketing tool for both “selling” their university to prospective students, while also providing their students with increased prospects for securing gainful employment following their graduation. Post-secondary institutions are cognizant of the job-market pressures facing their students, and prospective students’ potential awareness of difficulties they may face after graduation. So, assisting students in their post-graduation job search can have beneficial rewards in statistics of their graduates' career outcomes.

Within Social Sciences and Humanities programs, internships and co-op placements have not been as visible a component or option of their education than in many STEM disciplines. In fact, both Humanities and Social Science students demonstrate the least likelihood to experience work-integrated learning during their degree (Sattler & Peters, 2013). However, in recent years, there have been marked increases in the offerings PSEs are now providing to SSH students specifically. In fact, Social Science students now make up the second-highest cluster of co-op participants (behind STEM students), at approximately 30% participation; Arts and Humanities students had among the lowest participation rates in co-op programs, at approximately 7% (Sattler & Peters, 2013). Given that the transition from higher education to the labour market presents challenges for graduates, post-secondary institutions, and employers (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006), co-op/internships programs could be used to ameliorate some of the dilemmas that these stakeholders face.

It is important to note, though, that the quality of these work-integrated learning programs is critically important to employability benefits provided to students; not all co-op or internship programs are created...
the same, and “poorly structured and supervised WIL experiences may actually undermine learning and employability skill development” (Sattler & Peters, 2013). Given the incredible value that co-ops and internships can provide to graduates, employers, and PSEs themselves (Ontario Chamber of Commerce, 2017), it is worth looking at some of these SSH-specific programs, and what role they might play in SSH graduates’ employment pathways and outcomes after graduation. The following are a sample of co-op/internship programs offered through Ontario PSEs, alongside consideration of how SSH students are particularly engaged by these offerings.

**University of Ottawa**

- At the University of Ottawa, students are provided with industry-leading Co-operative Education Programs across many disciplines, including Social Science and Humanities. Through these programs, SSH students spend their first two years taking courses, following the degree requirements that a non-co-op student would pursue. The summer following the second year of study, students will begin their first of four terms dedicated to their co-op placements, and continue alternating between work placements and study semesters for the duration of their program.
- One of the major positive features of the University of Ottawa’s co-op program is the scope of degree programs that are eligible. Within both Social Science and Humanities programs, it appears that students in most (if not all) of the program offerings are eligible to participate.
- While the co-op program offered by the University of Ottawa is among the most accessible (from a program standpoint) and comprehensive (in terms of length and regularity of placement), students are required to complete their final academic semester after the summer of their fourth year, meaning that students are effectively required to begin a fifth year of study. This could be a difficult proposition for students, given that they may not react positively to the notion of extending their degree completion beyond the four-year standard, and may face unbearable costs for completing one semester in a fifth year (for example, many students sign year-long rental agreements for housing). (University of Ottawa, 2018) According to a major survey and analysis conducted by HEQCO, delaying graduation was among the top barriers students identified in dissuading them from participating in work-integrated learning (Sattler & Peters, 2013).

**McMaster University**

- SSH students at McMaster University are offered a multi-faced experiential learning component to their degree programs. However, there is not a cross-faculty standardized co-op or internship placement policy or program, but is instead faculty-specific. As a result, the experiential learning opportunities provided to Social Science and Humanities students differ.
- Social Science students in all programs are offered several courses focused specifically on students’ transition into the workforce, 4-6 week job shadowing experiences, 2-4 hours per week community-based placements, and a substantive 16-week paid internship at an external employer. This diversity of experiential opportunities allows Social Sciences students to customize the extent of their engagement with co-op placement/internship opportunities, and there is no indication that there is a requisite extension of degree completion time beyond four years (McMaster University, 2018).
For Humanities students, however, the opportunities for experiential learning are not as robust nor extensive as those offered by the Faculty of Social Science (McMaster University, 2018a). Namely, the extent of the Faculty of Humanities’ experiential offerings is limited to courses offering a practical, career-specific educational component, taught by the Faculty. Of course, these offerings undoubtedly provide students with perspectives and considerations that they might not have been exposed to otherwise. However, the absence of a non-classroom experiential component might limit the efficacy of assisting students in their transition into the workforce, especially when compared to the robustness of the Faculty of Social Science’s comprehensive experiential learning options.

University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT)

The Faculty of Social Science and Humanities at UOIT offers fourth-year students the opportunity to participate in their experiential learning option, which involves 100 hours of fieldwork with a community organization. In addition to the 100 hours, students are also required to attend in-class seminars surrounding the experiential learning process, as well as submitting assignments related to their experience. UOIT identifies the goal of experiential learning as “provides students with opportunities to acquire workplace skills and knowledge, confront the relationship between theory and practice, and cultivate a sense of personal and professional development” (University of Ontario Institute of Technology, 2018), which is consistent with the mandate and goals of both McMaster University and the University of Ottawa’s respective co-op programs.

It is not clear how (or how many) students are selected to participate in this program, nor is it clear what kinds of community organizations students engage with (for-profit, not-for-profit, charity, etc.). However, given the modest number of departments, programs, and course offerings UOIT offers in its Faculty of Social Science and Humanities, it is likely that students and professors engage with this process more informally than the highly-structured programs offered by McMaster University and the University of Ottawa.

The three aforementioned co-op programs represent some of the more robust placement options SSH students can participate in during their undergraduate education. Although it would be reasonable to posit that SSH students benefit from experiential learning experiences in their employment outcomes there is a limited amount of data on specific student experiences, especially sub-divided by program of study. However, there is evidence suggesting that, on the whole, students participating in experiential learning benefit from this experience. According to a Universities Canada survey on the employer-side of the equation, 80% of employers see co-op and internship students as being able to “add value to their company as a source of new talent and as future employees with workplace skills. Two-thirds say these new hires contribute new ideas to the company and are effective in their work” (Universities Canada, 2014). Employers in this survey also indicated the major constraints they face in hiring more co-op/internship students: “difficulties in finding the appropriate candidate, the time required of senior staff to train and supervise them and the salary cost.” Although co-op students overwhelmingly believe their co-op experience was valuable (Sattler & Peters, 2013), there are clearly opportunities for amending the various systems to ease the engagement of employers.

In terms of training and preparation students undertake before entering the job market after graduation, work-integrated learning programs represent a strong opportunity for students to gain concrete on-the-job
training and experience, which can prove to be a significant value-add to employers upon entering the job market. In short, work-integrated learning offers a promising opportunity for more SSH students to build marketable work experience before entering the job market.

Section 5: Employer perception of SSH grads’ employment readiness

One of the most interesting opportunities for research in this domain is the mismatch between graduates’ and employers’ perceptions of proficiency in various skills in the workplace. From the available evidence, PSE graduates have a tendency to overestimate their competence in soft- and hard-skills, vis-a-vis employers' estimations thereof. For example, an ongoing survey and report of students and recent graduates at Ryerson University, and employers in Ontario revealed a striking disconnect between skill appraisals. As the report suggests, “While recent graduates perceived themselves to be highly proficient in oral communication (90.7 per cent) and writing (93.1 per cent) skills, employers perceive recent graduate hires to be less proficient (47.6 per cent and 39.4 per cent)” (Cukier, 2011). Even more interesting, results of the study’s surveys suggest that much of the research on soft-skills thus far has focused on STEM graduates, while taking for granted that SSH graduates developed requisite soft-skills through their degree programs. In actuality, however, SSH graduates may not have sufficiently developed some of the more specific the soft-skills, despite possessing critical thinking and communication skills.

In 2016, the Business Council of Canada (BCC) produced an important study on the workforce expectations of Canada’s private sector, based on a survey of 90 large private corporations in Canada across multiple sectors (Business Council of Canada, 2016). According to the results of this survey, for entry-level hires there was an emphasis placed on “soft” (non-cognitive) skills. Among these soft skills, the most in-demand include collaboration/teamwork skills, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and people skills/relationship-building. It is worth mentioning, however, that the labels of “skills crisis” and some of the more damning forecasts of Canada’s skills-education-employment mismatch have not been universally endorsed. For example, in response to the perception of today’s university graduates comprising a “lost generation” in terms of their employment prospects, a report from TD suggests that these kind of visceral reactions are largely overstated and inconsistent with the data. As such, “there is some evidence of tightness across certain occupations and regions, but the analysis failed to provide a real smoking gun” on potential mismatches among the skills in-demand by employers and those possessed by job seekers (Burleton et al., 2013). In effect, the TD report suggests that fear of a significant skills mismatch are considerably forward-looking, and inconsistent with the current labour market data.

This data does, however, require some qualification. While employers indicated that soft-skills were highly sought-after, the importance of “hard skills” (i.e., functional knowledge required to fulfill job tasks, duties, and responsibilities) fluctuates in relation to the position that an employer is seeking to fulfill. While this may seem obvious, it is critical to emphasize that not all jobs are an appropriate fit for SSH graduates, and vice-versa. For instance, SSH graduates are objectively unqualified, and likely not interested, in entry-level positions in nursing, optometry, or engineering. With this in mind, it is ill-advised to perceive macro-level labour shortages and SSH graduate unemployment or underemployment as directly-related. While the optimal labour market features all “jobs with people and people with jobs”, not all jobs are for all people, and not all people are for all jobs. The results of the BCC survey suggest this may be true; according to the report,
the importance of soft skills relative to hard skills depends on the position an employer is seeking to fill. For instance, companies from the mining/materials and industrial/consumer manufacturing sectors placed a heavy emphasis on recruits with a strong suite of hard skills. In contrast, respondents from the financial and service sectors placed more emphasis on soft skills. Companies in the IT/telecom sector indicated a preference for both customer-service skills (typically defined as soft skills) and technological literacy, a hard skill” (Business Council of Canada, 2016).

Notwithstanding the specific, functional skills that employers might demand for positions requiring specialized expertise, “Canadian companies are looking for graduates with the ability to communicate clearly both orally and verbally, work effectively in teams, think critically and creatively, solve problems, and exercise leadership” (Adamuti-Trache et al., 2006).

Conclusion

This report sought to better understand the relationship between SSH graduates and the labour market, with a focus on these graduates’ early transition into the workforce. While there are more questions than answers to many issues surrounding this subject, there were some important and interesting trends highlighted. While our state of knowledge surrounding employers’ perception of job readiness among PSE graduates is (slowly) expanding, there are significant gaps in the literature that would benefit from analysis. In particular, within the context of this report, there are three such gaps that deserve further consideration.

First, better data and research is needed to understand the intentions of SSH graduates after their post-secondary education. We know, from this report and previous data, that there are multiple paths SSH graduates pursue, including employment (full-time and part-time) and further education. We also know, however, that the representation of SSH students in PSE enrolments have declined (while, perhaps not surprisingly, STEM enrolments are increasing) (Statistics Canada, 2018). However, it would be helpful to have a better understanding of what paths SSH graduates actually intend to pursue, and then actually end up pursuing. Better understanding of what SSH students are looking for out of their program (post-graduation) would have multiple benefits for informing related policies and activities of PSEs, employers, and the government. Furthermore, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which SSH students and graduates’ intended path post-graduation changes over the course of their education and after graduation. It would be fascinating to explore, for instance, the extent to which further education becomes a more intended pathway for SSH students/graduates at the beginning, midpoint, and terminus of a SSH student’s education, as well as after their early years in the workforce. This might help understand, for instance, whether SSH graduates pursue further education out of a long-standing intention, as a result of difficulties in the labour market, or other factors. In short, better student-informed data is needed to help us understand post-graduation outcomes vis-a-vis graduates’ intentions and ambitions.

A second important gap centres on the demand-side of the equation, and specifically how employers perceive SSH graduates in terms of suitability for their workforce. It would be particularly interesting to explore the extent to which employers act as a barrier for SSH graduates seeking employment, on the basis of the perceptions employers might have of SSH graduates. In other words, are employers’ perceptions of SSH graduates skewed in the direction of the oft-recited caricature of graduates offering few valuable transferable
skills to the workforce? While there have been many efforts to emphasize the skills (and particularly “soft” skills) that SSH graduates can bring to the workforce, it is uncertain whether employers view these “soft” skills as bringing the same value to their workforce as more vocational, job-specific skills that might be more associated with STEM disciplines. Understanding employers’ perceptions of SSH graduates is critically important to reconciling the weaker entrance of SSH graduates into the workforce.

A third area of inquiry that deserves considerably more attention is the barriers that SSH graduates face in their transition from education to the workforce, as a distinct unit of analysis. We know that there are certain systemic barriers that under-represented and marginalized groups face in such a transition (Canada-wide). However, the data has not covered program-specific barriers, only program-specific opportunities and outcomes. This is, of course, a major missing link in the discussion of SSH graduates’ transition into the workforce; notwithstanding the difficulties and barriers that are endemic to all programs of study, what factors are specifically limiting the ability of SSH graduating cohorts to achieve the same employment rates as their non-SSH peers? Is this predominantly the result of employer bias against SSH graduates’ workforce-readiness, or are SSH graduates not seeking the same opportunities as non-SSH graduates, and therefore we are making unfair comparisons? These important questions should be considered in future data-gathering and research.

This report attempted to identify some of the “known unknowns” in understanding what specific challenges, barriers, and opportunities SSH students and graduates face in their transition from education to the workforce. Future research into this particular segment of the educational and labour market population would be highly-constructive to shedding further light on some of the specific factors and variables that are endogenous to SSH students and graduates at the baccalaureate level.
References


The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada or the Government of Ontario.