

Report on the TRaCE Interviews

“The TRaCE project is a collaboration of 25 Canadian universities (and more to come!), the [Canadian Association for Graduate Studies](#), the [Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences](#), the [Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario](#), and the [Jackman Humanities Institute at the University of Toronto](#). It is headquartered at the [Institute for the Public Life of Arts and Ideas \(IPLAI\) at McGill University](#).

The purpose of the project is four-fold: (1) to track PhDs who have graduated in the humanities; (2) to report on where they are, whether inside or outside the academy, and on what they have achieved; (3) to connect them with each other and with faculty and students inside the academy; and (4) to sponsor exchanges of knowledge and knowhow among PhD students, faculty members, other academic PhDs, and PhDs pursuing careers in non-academic sectors.”

- [About TRaCE](#)

In the first phase of the project, launched in January 2016, I collected data on 579 PhD graduates, who completed their degree between 2004-2014. These graduates came from nine (9) departments in five (5) Ontarian universities (University of Toronto, University of Ottawa, McMaster University, Ryerson University, and the University of Western Ontario).

The second stage of the project, which began in March, aimed at conducting interviews with graduates from the Centre for Medieval Studies (CMS). Between early March and the end of May, approximately a third of the graduates I managed to reach agreed to an interview. Overall, I was able to conduct twenty-one (21) interviews, with male and female graduates, who are currently employed in academic and non-academic positions across four continents.

The project has highlighted the culture change which has been unfolding over the last ten years, in and outside the walls of the university. Our graduates often mentioned issues which, with the benefit of hindsight, they are now addressing in their current workplace, and which are also being tackled at CMS and at the University of Toronto. The interviews provided an opportunity for self-reflection about the challenges the graduates had to face, but also about the elements of the program which have made them successful.

The present document is based on notes from the interviews, which have all been pre-emptively reviewed and approved by each of the interviewees. The graduates who agreed to participate in the project signed a confidentiality agreement form designed by the TRaCE team. Out of respect for confidentiality, I anonymized this document by removing names and referring to our graduates in the third person plural (they).

In order to conduct the interviews, TRaCE provided the research assistants with a questionnaire, which included questions on teaching, funding, mentorship, professional development, time to completion, experience on the job market, and general reflections about the PhD degree. After some consultation, I added a set of questions which would specifically address certain particularities of the CMS program (for instance, the interdisciplinary character of the degree).

This document is a reflection of the free-flowing nature of the interviews. Our graduates often distinguished during our conversations what they perceived to be the fruit of personal experience as opposed to broader insights they wished to share about the program, the department, the university, and the academic world in general. As a result, this document is by no means an exhaustive survey or list of recommendations about the PhD, but rather a step towards fostering dialogue and connecting past and present members of the CMS community.

The next and third stage of the TRaCE project seeks to strengthen and cultivate the links between students, faculty, alumnae, and alumni at CMS. We are looking into implementing certain initiatives (such as an interactive alumni listserv) and welcome more suggestions that may help fulfill these goals.

Importance of community

- Nearly every of the interviewee mentioned the importance of the community at CMS, which was built right from the start, thanks to the orientation week, the social events, being introduced and paired up with a senior student, having senior students as Latin instructors, being in classes with students from different years, having lunch at the Centre, going to talks and conferences, spending time in the PIMS common room, running into colleagues in or outside the libraries, etc. Beyond building community, this allows students to become current with topics other than their own.

Re-creating community after graduation

- Our graduates often end up becoming the only medievalists in their department, which has both its advantages and disadvantages.
- As the only medievalist, one also becomes the only expert in one's field, and is able to teach a wide range of courses. For instance, a graduate began offering Latin courses for the first time at their institution. Another graduate has created a new minor in medieval studies at their university.
- A number of our graduates show much initiative in order to reconnect or even re-create the sense of community they experienced at CMS. Our graduates stress the importance of going to conferences, going online, and establishing collaborations. One graduate mentioned for instance that they carpool with other medievalists from their university to drive to a research library every month.

Keeping in touch with the CMS community

- Many graduates stay in touch with the CMS community, their former colleagues and professors as well as new students and faculty, and feel part of a continuing tradition.
- Some graduates mentioned that they were able to hear about or secure employment because of another alumnus.
- The graduates expressed interest in cultivating contact with the CMS community. One graduate mentioned the possibility of alumni contributing to the newsletter. Other graduates affirmed that they would be interested in being able to hire CMS students as research assistants. They were also interested in providing mentorship to current students.

Teaching experience*Importance of teaching experience on the job market*

- Every graduate mentioned that teaching experience is key on the job market today.
- A graduate pointed out that their research profile was competitive, and they were able to be interviewed in research-focused universities, but not in teaching-focused colleges, until they acquired more teaching experience through a visiting assistant professorship.
- On the other hand, both graduates who had little or a lot of teaching experience indicated that only having marking teaching assistantships (TAs) makes writing and finishing early easier. It is a paradox: not having TAs and instructorships is difficult for finding employment, but having few TAs and instructorships helps finishing one's degree more quickly.

Issues with pedagogical training

- Although the later cohorts of graduates were aware of resources like the TA training program, many of our graduates affirmed that they received little formal training to prepare them for their teaching assignments.
- One graduate suggested that professors should give more thought about their TAs' training and the kind of documentation TAs need to acquire in order to prepare them for the job market (for instance, receiving course evaluations). This is especially the case for smaller units like Victoria College and St Michael's College, which might collaborate more with bigger units like CUPE 1 in order to provide training for their TAs.

Funding

- While the TRaCE project discussions focus mainly on program formats and student academic experience, the interview made it very clear that funding has a major impact on students' trajectory through their program.
- Our graduates all had different funding packages, and some of the interviewees from the earlier cohorts arrived at the university before the implementation of the minimum funding package.
- Based on their experience, our graduates all agreed that funding was key to their completion of the degree, because without it, they would not have undertaken it. While they appreciated

this support, they raised the fact that Toronto is a very expensive city to live in, and the funding package does not reflect this reality.

- Our graduates suggested the implementation of some kind of appeal process to extend the funding package.
- Another graduate recommended that the university benchmark what is done in other universities and adjust to the cost living in Toronto.
- A graduate who has been working extensively at the administrative level pointed out that funding is being discussed in black-and-white terms: funding doesn't necessarily mean full-funding. Could a year of half-funding or tuition waver be implemented? Not having to pay full tuition after ABD status could constitute a way to avoid having students go into debt in order to finish their degree.

Time to completion

- Some of the graduates were able to finish in five years. They stressed funding as a key factor for timely completion.
- However, some of the graduates who finished within five years declared that they felt a bit rushed, and that for this reason, their thesis was perhaps less ambitious and not polished enough to be quickly turned into a book.
- Most graduates argued that the average time to completion is not five years statistically, and therefore the expectation should be pushed to reflect the average time (six years).
- The main obstacles to timely completion which were mentioned, were the lack of appropriate funding, having to take on extra work (teaching assignments, research assistantships not related to the dissertation) on or outside of campus, and the slow response from committee members on dissertation chapters.
- Other challenges raised were mental and physical health issues, and the difficulty of a thesis project (for instance, if it requires a lot of research abroad, manuscript work, etc.). Some of the students who had recourse to accessibility services or financial counseling services on campus however reported a positive experience.
- On the other hand, the factors which especially enabled timely completion were securing better funding, having a supportive and responsive dissertation committee, the access to library resources, and self-motivation.

The PhD program

Coursework

- Some graduates argued that most courses at CMS are sometimes narrowly defined, and that there could be more courses about global literature or global history, since these are approaches which matter in the field today.
- Another graduate raised the point that some courses which might appear to be 'literature' courses end up being language courses, which do not explore enough the content or the historical context of the texts being read. One graduate focused on philology and literature regretted the lack of emphasis on methodology and theory in the courses at CMS.

- A graduate actually expressed the view that CMS could become more interdisciplinary by collaborating more with other departments. They also thought that students should be encouraged to take courses in other departments. Although this is an ongoing issue, it should be indicated that efforts are currently made to further emphasize interdisciplinarity, as recent initiatives like the Ethiopic Studies program, in partnership with the Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations department, or the Digital Humanities program in development, show.
- A graduate argued that the current requirements should be more conducive to producing the thesis. Coursework prepares students for very different goals and skills than what is required by the thesis. It makes the transition between pre- and post-candidacy very difficult.
- While they recognized that cohort-building occurs through the Latin courses, which most students take in their Masters or early PhD years, another graduate suggested that, having a core, interdisciplinary seminar which everyone would take, and which would go through the major historical, literary, and religious developments in the Middle Ages, would be helpful for teaching and research. As a graduate-level course, it would allow people to work more intensely and quickly.

Major Fields vs Comprehensive Exams

- The graduates were divided on this question. A number of graduates highlighted that the Major Fields exam was useful for preparing them for their thesis work.
- On the other hand, a number of graduates also raised that having a narrow focus could be detrimental to teaching experience. They felt like, once on the job market, they had to catch up in comparison with colleagues who had done Comprehensive exams.
- However, most of the graduates, including those in favour of the Comps, were unsure about how to implement an exam like the Comps, because the medieval period is so long and there are no canonical works which could be imposed to every student.
- Some raised the idea of having students take the Comps in other departments (like History, English, Philosophy, etc.). Most of the graduates also acknowledged that the PhD degree at CMS already involves a lot of requirements, and adding another requirement might slow down students' progress.
- The question of whether or not our graduates had passed comprehensive exams however was never raised in an interview. Many graduates said that most departments would assume that a PhD graduate would be able to teach broadly, no matter the exams they took during their PhD degree.

Writing the dissertation

- A graduate pointed out that for them, the hardest part of the PhD was the transition from course work to writing one's own. Organizing sessions on writing a dissertation at this middle point would be helpful.
- Writing a dissertation is a different genre from writing a paper for a class or writing an article. Some people don't make that transition well, and then it falls on the individual supervisor to help the student out. There should be more acknowledgement that people write in different

ways, need different things; some people can just go and receive support at key moments, while others need to be prompted and to have guidance.

- I let the graduates know that the implementation of dissertation writing groups was one of the major points being discussed in the PhD Advancement Working Group.

Preparing for the job market

More emphasis on professionalization

- The increasing importance of professionalization was one of the topics which came up the most in the interviews. It was also noted as a marked shift in academic culture at large, and was reflected in the difference between the experiences of earlier and later cohorts. One graduate who completed their degree after 2008 observed, for instance, that they were among the first to give a mock job talk.
- The graduates pointed out that career counseling events (ex: workshops on how to write a CV) should be more frequent and start early in the course of the PhD. For instance, some graduates suggested that the mock job talk happen as early as the third year. They also recommended that the Centre organize informal gatherings with people doing the job hunt, and ask junior faculty to discuss their experience. I informed the graduates that the new hires and senior faculty members have been more involved in professionalization workshops in the last few years.
- Overall, graduates stressed that it is never too early to start thinking about the job market, even if not actively. Job postings can sometimes ask for the impossible or be unintelligible, and it's useful to grasp this early on and to develop an open mind. For example, medievalists with a History or Literature or Philosophy bent might want to take a graduate seminar in Religious Studies or to seek TAs in related fields in order to enter that market.

Access to more resources

- A graduate expressed that they wished they had known about self-help books about how to do a PhD. They eventually turned to resources like the American Historical Association and the Chronicle of Higher Education. These resources had a concrete impact on their career: reading the website of the Canadian University Teachers Association about how to negotiate their starting salary, resulted in a larger research grant and higher salary.
- A number of graduates also mentioned that they wished they had known more about the publishing process, which can be arduous and time-consuming.
- There were also suggestions for more workshops on time management, balancing research/teaching/administration, money management, negotiating their relationship with their supervisor, etc. I mentioned the fact that these issues are punctually discussed at CMS through workshops organized by Sources and Resources, but that, due to the nature of student committees, it is difficult both to ensure the sustainability of these resources, and to reach all students in the department. Similarly, these resources are provided by other instances at the university (the School of Graduate Studies, CUPE, the Graduate Students' Union, the Counseling and Psychological Services, etc.), but the challenge is to make students aware of

them. This is the case for instance with the Graduate Skills Program or the supervisory guidelines issued by the School of Graduate Studies.

Building up the CV

- One graduate argued that the market is oriented towards credentializing and profile building: teaching certificates, outreach, professional development, administrative and collaborative skills can end up mattering as much as research. It is not enough to have a record of being able to do something, the market requires one to find many ways to prove this same ability.
- Certain graduates emphasized that it is important to be aware of how a university functions. We get so involved in our own research when we write the dissertation that we tend to forget that there's a whole university outside of our own department. Yet, one needs most of those parts for the university to work as a whole.

On the job market

Challenges and advantages of a 'medieval studies' degree

- A number of graduates mentioned the importance of establishing a clear disciplinary profile, given CMS' interdisciplinary vocation.
- Still, a graduate conceived this possible bias against medieval studies as a strength, as they always felt the importance of showing the relevance of the Middle Ages. They were able to distinguish themselves particularly from other historians, who were not expected to justify the relevance of their area of focus.

Explaining what 'medieval studies' means

- It is important to tailor the cover letter so that the letter provides the background information which the CV does not explain. For instance, for a historian, it's important to explain how one's research is historical in spite of article titles that might let hiring committee label someone as a "literature" scholar. Another graduate stated that they started writing in their cover letter that they held a degree in "medieval literature" rather than "medieval studies."
- A graduate explained that they always mention and briefly explain their technical skills (Latin, paleography, diplomatics, textual editing) in their CV, their job talks, on grant applications, and even include a picture of a manuscript page to help others to understand their work. While they were working for promotion, they always reminded colleagues and supervisors what their research entails, namely that they are not working with typed-out texts in English translation. This necessarily affects the publication output as well. They also reiterate their engagement with current scholarly or theoretical concerns because non-medievalists may assume that medieval studies is escapist or reactionary.
- At the time of their job search, the same graduate used the Teaching Dossier service at U of T and had it attach a general letter from CMS Director explaining what a medieval studies degree is and what is Toronto's reputation. It's also up to the student and their supervisor to explain these points in their letters.

Opportunities beyond North America and Western Europe

- Some graduates emphasized the emergence of young, ambitious universities abroad. A degree in medieval studies is marketable on account of its versatility, but one has to find universities that could see it. Such places tend to be smaller, and they are interested in polyvalent candidates.
- A degree from the University of Toronto gives a lot of advantages, especially in these new universities, because of Toronto's academic standing.

Importance of publishing

- One graduate stressed that, as a visiting or an adjunct, it is crucial to keep publishing at least one article/year in order to secure a tenure-track job.

Resources for finding employment opportunities

A graduate pointed out that they wish they had known more about trying to find places to pick up part-time teaching work. A lot of part-time instructorships are difficult to find, especially in the US. This involves emailing a department and asking if they have open positions, thinking outside the box, looking for online history programs, seminars, etc.

The value of a post-doctoral degree

- Many graduates praised the opportunity of doing a post-doctoral degree. One graduate stressed that people see post-docs as a way to keep them afloat, a carry-over, but it actually allows one to get a lot of work done, which will be beneficial for one's whole career.

The state of the job market

- While there are certainly key elements to a CV (a certain amount of publications, teaching experience, a good thesis), a number of graduates, including some who have served on hiring committees, emphasized that most applicants are qualified, and that hiring comes down to a question of fulfilling specific needs.

Alternative academia*The need for a cultural change*

- Most of our graduates, thinking about the steep decline of academic positions after 2008, mentioned that there should be an acknowledgement of alternative-academia (alt-ac) careers, more attention paid to the role of public history, and the possibilities for a PhD program to be oriented towards a more practical approach. This was another major shift identified by our graduates in the academic culture of the last ten years.
- The graduates generally viewed as problematic the attitude which alternates between "do a PhD because you love it," and "the only valuable career path is an academic one." This fosters a culture which is not preparing students for the reality of the job market.
- This culture is a major obstacle for students who are or might be interested in alternative academia, because these professional paths are not being valued or supported enough. The transition, professional but also psychological, from academia to alternative academia therefore becomes very difficult.

- One graduate pointed out that right now, departments are being evaluated on their graduates' placement in academic institutions. A graduate could become a world leader and it would not count towards a department's positive evaluation. They stressed that departments need to actively change this attitude by promoting graduates who have pursued a career outside the academy. This step has recently been taken by CMS which features on its website graduates in alt-ac positions.
- One graduate argued that a re-valuing of the humanities can be channeled through alternative academia: if PhD graduates market themselves well and find employment on the alt-ac market, they will show employers the value of a PhD degree in the humanities.

The role of the faculty

- Many graduates indicated that, in order for a change in the culture to occur, faculty member should be more proactive, buy into the idea of alt-ac careers, and provide resources for students.
- One graduate suggested that faculty should be trained in order to become knowledgeable about alt-ac. A committee dedicated to alt-ac could also be set-up in the department.

Opening different career paths during the PhD

- The graduates who went into alternative academia began to build other career paths during their degree. Their supervisors gave them advice on how to keep on building their CV, so they could keep their options open, but also because the skills acquired during the PhD will set anyone up well for any field.
- Many graduates raised the idea of having practical courses on what could be done with one's skills as a medievalist. A pilot project with summer internships, making students go work with the Archives nationales in Ottawa, museums, publishing houses, would all be interesting opportunities.
- One graduate became aware of the job posting for their current position because of the network they had built in non-academic circles.
- One graduate emphasized that PhD students are well-suited for entrepreneurship, although it is a professional avenue that is not promoted enough. They argued that a lot of graduate students are not fit for traditional careers, and are less motivated by money than by originality of thought. Entrepreneurship allows for this kind of pursuit.

Marketing oneself on the alt-ac market

- Some of our graduates applied to both academic and alt-academic positions at the same time.
- One grad explained that it is important to tailor one's application to the academic or non-academic context: they would include too much academics in their CV for alt-ac jobs, and this was not perceived positively by employers.
- In interviews and CVs, it is important to discuss not the research done during the PhD, but the kind of skills one developed, the framework in which the research was developed.
- The two questions that are the most difficult when one applies to alt-ac jobs revolve around professional experience, and management, leadership, organization skills. One needs to talk

about applying for grants, teaching, marking, managing students, time management, and in terms of organizational skills: organize research material for one's dissertation, for instance.

- Other skills to highlight include research, writing, editing, presentations skills (teaching, conference presentation), being able to do independent learning, working quickly, acquiring very difficult skills (paleography, languages, etc.), performing detailed work, being self-driven, coming up with one's own initiatives, and having long-term goals broken down into smaller stages.
- Another graduate indicated that the most useful skill they learnt was being to get over the humps of frustration when they hit a roadblock in their research.

Advantages of holding a PhD degree in an alt-ac position

- One graduate who worked in university administration pointed out that they reached a glass ceiling at some point in their administrative career. In order to get higher and be able to do more in any capacity – that is academic and administrative – on campus, a PhD was required.
- The graduates in alt-ac positions all stressed the fact that the skills acquired during the PhD are transferable, and that they are drawing on and combining these skills in their current work.
- One graduate pointed out that academia and alternative academia is not an either/or situation. They still are invited to give lectures and attend conferences, and do not feel like they had to renounce their academic interests because they did not end up pursuing a purely academic career.