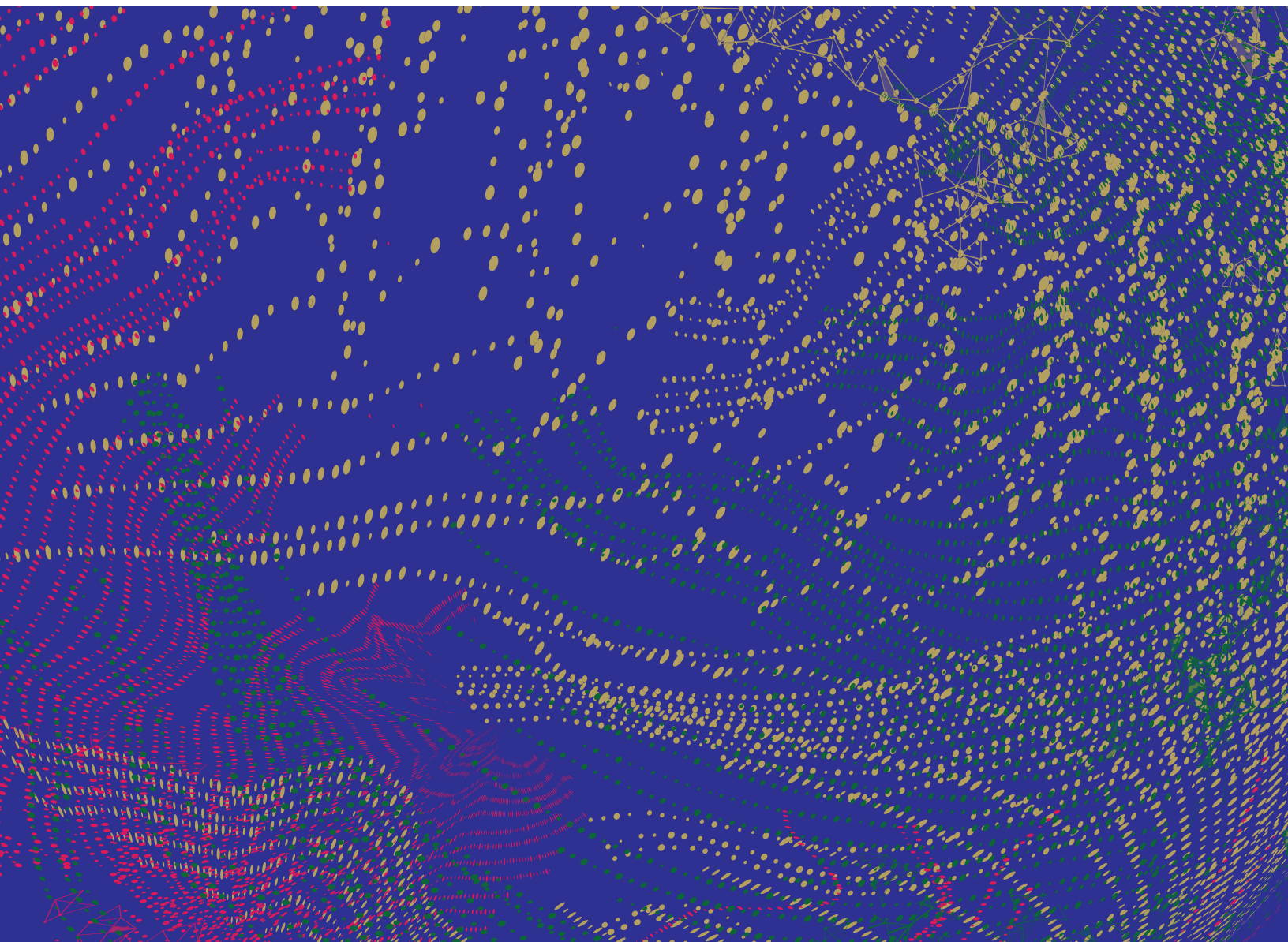


The World Humanities Report

The Humanities in Canada: A Complex Ecosystem

Imre Szeman



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The Humanities in Canada: A Complex Ecosystem

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The humanities face challenges worldwide and the situation is no different in Canada.¹ As elsewhere, the interest of undergraduate students in humanities degrees has continued to decline.² While graduate programs in the humanities remain vibrant, the ability of newly minted PhDs to obtain faculty positions has diminished year over year. Greater demands have been placed on faculty members in terms of research intensity and productivity, and they have had to contend with ever-increasing class size and administrative loads. Universities across the country continue to reimagine themselves as institutions whose research should be guided primarily by measurable outputs—for example, new technologies, patents, and policy—rather than the creation and sharing of basic research; the Humboldtian ideal of comprehensive, integrated learning is fading in Canada, if perhaps not as quickly as elsewhere. Finally, government funding of universities and colleges has decreased, sometimes significantly, either because governments have kept funding stable (resulting in a decline due to inflation) or have actively decreased it, which has had a greater impact on the humanities than on other disciplines and fields of inquiry. Considering these developments, administrators, students, and faculty members in the humanities can be forgiven for worries about the future of the humanities in Canadian universities.

Given all the above, it can be easy to forget that there remains much in the Canadian university system that is worth celebrating, including the position and status of the humanities within in. The university and college system in Canada is publicly funded by provincial governments—there are no private

¹ This report has benefited from discussions and exchanges with Alison Keith (Director, Jackman Humanities Institute, University of Toronto), Brenda MacDougall (University Research Chair in Métis Family and Community Traditions, and Chair, Institute of Indigenous Research and Studies, University of Ottawa), Gabriel Miller (President and Chief Executive Officer, [Canadian] Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences), and Jennifer Simpson (Provost and Vice-President, Academic, Ryerson University). It also benefited from consulting the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences' report *Think Big: How the Social Sciences and Humanities Are Building a Better Canada*, November 2021, [https://www.federationhss.ca/sites/default/files/2021-11/Role of HSS Report-EN.pdf](https://www.federationhss.ca/sites/default/files/2021-11/Role%20of%20HSS%20Report-EN.pdf).

² The percentage of students in the humanities in 2005 was 11.7 percent; by 2019 it had fallen to 8.8 percent, a 32 percent decrease. See OCED Higher Education Data, "Tertiary Graduates by Field," accessed March 15, 2022, <https://data.oecd.org/students/tertiary-graduates-by-field.htm#indicator-chart>.

universities in Canada.³ Despite decreases in funding in some parts of the country, government funding continues to be a core component of the budgets of institutions of higher education (universities and colleges); in the main, this funding is done based on levels of student enrollment and does not differentiate between areas of study (i.e., humanities students count the same as engineering students). Youth access to and participation in tertiary education remains high and, indeed, increased during COVID-19 across all disciplines.⁴ More Canadians hold university degrees than at any point in the country's history, including humanities degrees, despite a decline in the percentage of students enrolling in humanities. Researchers in Canada continue to have access to funding for their projects from the government. While base funding to universities is the responsibility of provincial governments, the federal government provides substantial research support to institutions and individual researchers via the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). In 2016–17 SSHRC funding for research and student training was Can\$349 million and institutional support was Can\$369 million; the figures in 2020–21 were Can\$524 million and Can\$415 million, a growth of 50 percent and 12 percent respectively; the planned 2022–23 budget is for Can\$628 million.⁵ The points made about what still works in Canada are not intended to downplay the challenges—some significant—faced by the humanities. Nonetheless, the humanities continue to be seen as an important and necessary feature of campus life—an area of study that (with few exceptions) is present on every campus and that contributes in an ongoing way to university research and teaching.

The humanities in Canada form a complex ecosystem, due to differences in university culture and funding from province to province and to institutional differences within provinces—a range from major global research institutions (e.g., University of Toronto, University of British Columbia) to much smaller institutions focused on undergraduate education (e.g., Acadia University, University of King's College; such institutions are the equivalent of US colleges

³ While there are several private tertiary education institutions, they are organized around religious beliefs and outlooks and are not integrated into the public system, which predominates in size. Such private institutions are seldom thought to be part of the Canadian university system, and there is little public recognition of the quality of their programs.

⁴ Statistics Canada, "Participation Rate in Education, Population Aged 18 to 34, by Age Group and Type of Institution Attended," November 1, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710010301>.

⁵ These figures can be found in SSHRC, *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Departmental Plan 2019–20*, 2019, https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/publications/dp/2019-2020/2019-20_DP_FinalE.pdf; and *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Departmental Plan 2022–23*, 2022, https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/publications/dp/2022-2023/departmental_plan-plan-ministeriel-2022-23-eng.pdf.

such as Bard or Wellesley). There are wide discrepancies in government transfers, operating funds, and university endowments (e.g., University of Toronto has an endowment of Can\$3.15 billion; University of King's College has Can\$32.4 million—a substantial difference, even on a per student basis), which have a differential impact on the health of the humanities from province to province. Very small numbers of Canadian students travel outside their home province to study (an estimated 10 percent)⁶ or, indeed, outside of their home region (e.g., students in the Greater Toronto Area will stay in the GTA). As such, universities in smaller communities often struggle to maintain enrollments sufficient to support their operations; the knock-on effects for programs with low student numbers (i.e., humanities programs) are easy to intuit. With all these differences in mind, the comments below are intended to capture broad trends currently defining the shape and function of the humanities in Canada, as well as to offer some insight into what distinguishes Canadian university practices from other national systems—specifically, the United States.

There are three primary developments that have helped to redefine the Canadian humanities in the recent past and are likely to continue to do so going forward. None are completely novel developments: they constitute the extension of ongoing shifts and changes in university priorities and protocols. Each of the three developments also mirrors changes happening elsewhere in the world, both in the humanities specifically and in the university system more generally. For the most part, each of the developments described below has only recently moved to the foreground of Canadian academic life, and as such, their long-term implications for the humanities remain to be seen.

New Priorities and Directions in Research Funding

SSHRC is the primary source of research funding for the humanities in Canada. By comparison to the United States (e.g., National Endowment for the Humanities, Rockefeller Foundation) and United Kingdom (e.g., Leverhulme Trust), there are far fewer private institutions (foundations, NGOs) on which researchers can depend for support; those few that do exist have small financial resources and tend to position their grants in relation to very specific issues and topics. As such, the direction and orientation of SSHRC programming understandably influences what researchers do and how and why they do it,

⁶ Universities Canada, “Facts and Stats,” accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/>.

from the methodological approaches that researchers use to the specific subjects of study on which they focus. It is important to note that SSHRC is a federal government agency, based within the Innovation, Science and Economic Development department. Nevertheless, its executive is largely drawn from academia, and the agency solicits input from scholars in the humanities and social sciences to shape its programs and politics.⁷

One of the major changes in SSHRC programming has been its introduction of “future challenge areas”—sixteen areas of research focus it identified a decade ago and which it now sees as central to how it assigns funding.⁸ While there are no research funds specifically dedicated to each of these areas, researchers have come to understand that the success of their applications is greatly improved if they can connect their research proposals to one or more of these areas—they are requested to do so in their applications for any and all grants. SSHRC funds Knowledge Synthesis Grants in each of these areas, which provide financial support to teams of researchers from different areas tasked with producing expansive literature reviews; taken together, these are seen as framing the multiple dimensions of any given challenge area.⁹

The challenges areas are as follows:

Working in the Digital Economy	Global Health and Wellness for the 21st Century	The Emerging Asocial Society	Shifting Dynamics of Privilege and Marginalization
Building Better Lives across the Gender Spectrum	Inhabiting Challenging Environments	Balancing Risks and Benefits in the Emerging Surveillance Society	Humanity+
The Evolving Bio-Age	Living within Earth's Carrying Capacity	The Pervasive Contamination of the “Natural”	Envisioning Governance Systems That Work
The Changing Nature of Security and Conflict	Truth under Fire in a Post-Fact World	The Arts Transformed	Erosion of Culture and History

⁷ To give but two examples: the current president of SSHRC, Ted Hewitt, was a professor of sociology at Western University, and SSHRC’s Vice-President for Research, Dominique Bérubé, holds a PhD in environmental sciences and was at the Université de Montréal prior to joining SSHRC.

⁸ Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, “Future Challenge Areas: 2018–21,” accessed March 15, 2022, https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/challenge_areas-domaines_des_defis/index-eng.aspx.

⁹ The most recent Knowledge Synthesis Grants were in “Living within Earth’s Carrying Capacity” (2019), “Working in the Digital Economy” (2020), and “The Emerging Asocial Society” (2021).

As might be evident from the titles of these areas, the identified future challenges favor research in the social sciences (and this has been borne out by the projects which have been in fact funded). Accordingly, humanists wishing to contribute to research in any one of these areas have had to reorient the focus of their work, so as to make it legible not only to social scientists, but also to those government agencies, civil society organizations, and NGOs who wish to make use of university research to address social and political problems.

While this might be seen as an impingement or impediment to what the humanities do and do best, the challenge of making humanities research newly “relevant” has in some cases created new, innovative research projects and novel directions for future work.

The humanities in Canada share a great deal with the humanities in the United States.

There are obvious reasons for this. Many academics in Canada are US citizens or have trained in the US, and the professional academic structure of the two countries makes up a single research ecosystem (via, for instance, shared journals, learned societies, and conferences). One of the differences that exists, however, is how research inquiry is imagined and carried out—a difference in large part due to SSHRC. Humanists in Canada are much more likely to work in research teams than in the US, however small (two researchers) or large (more than twenty-five) such teams might be. These teams are also much more likely to be genuinely interdisciplinary, involving researchers from across the humanities and social sciences, and even farther afield.

This difference in the scale of research originates at least to some degree from the focus of SSHRC programming since the council’s origin in 1977; the orientation of faculty research to large research teams has certainly been reinforced by a number of new initiatives introduced by SSHRC over the past fifteen years. In the United States, research within the humanities is imagined as a practice carried out by individuals, as exemplified by the value which continues to be placed on single-authored monographs and journal articles. Humanities research in Canada has evolved to become, if not in its entirety then in large part, a joint project involving fellow researchers. The long shadow of US humanities research protocols and practices has left Canadian humanities

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researchers in an unstable place, as they want both to distinguish themselves within the larger North American ecosystem (through solo-authored books and publications, for example) and to apply for and receive large team research grants; the latter are increasingly valued by Canadian institutions and seen as evidence of research success and a guarantor of research quality and impact. At present, the curriculum vitae of a mid-career Canadian humanities scholar looks very different from that of their US counterparts, even if both attend the same conferences and read books published by the same university presses.

The SSHRC program that has had the biggest impact on the co-production of humanities research in Canada is the Partnership Grants program.¹⁰ This highly competitive program awards up to Can\$2.5 million (US\$1.96 million) for research carried out over four to seven years. To be competitive, applicants must assemble academic research teams comprised of campus-based researchers from across the disciplines and not only or even primarily ones located at their own institutions. The project also must be organized in relationship to and in conjunction with partner organizations, both academic and nonacademic, who participate actively in project research and are expected to also benefit from it. It is required that partner organizations provide additional resources to the project's bottom line, whether through matching grants or in-kind services. This means that the overall budget for a partnership project is typically well over the amount awarded by SSHRC. Finally, these projects are required to foreground student training and knowledge mobilization (i.e., presenting research at conferences, workshops, publications) and to engage in public outreach programs by which they might share research findings. While the research funds available through this program may be significant, to be successful in receiving it, humanities researchers have had to substantially adapt the direction, focus, and methodology of their projects.

While projects in the humanities are eligible for partnership projects, in practice the majority of these grants are awarded to projects based in the social sciences. In the October 2020 competition, for example, awards were given to projects with titles such as “Urban Sanctuary, Migrant Solidarity and Hospitality in Global Perspective,” “Twenty-First Century Borders: Emergent Challenges within and among States,” “International and Canadian Child Rights Partnership,” and “Participedia Phase Two: Strengthening Democracy

¹⁰ Information on the Partnership Grant program can be found at: https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/partnership_grants_stage1-subventions_partenariat_etape1-eng.aspx.

by Mobilizing Knowledge of Democratic Innovations.”¹¹ Projects organized by social scientists, which are linked to social and political outcomes and which are connected to a range of sociopolitical practices and institutions, fit far better with the demands of this grant program and possess a research legitimacy for external agencies that can be hard to express for humanities projects. For instance, humanities projects are unlikely to list the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a Ghanaian federal ministry, and the City of Montreal among their partners; the “Urban Sanctuary” project does.

One of the few successful humanities-led partnership research projects in the 2020 competition was “Thinking Through the Museum: A Partnership Approach to Curating Difficult Knowledge in Public,” which received the full Can\$2.5 million over seven years. This project is about the average size of a partnership team. “Thinking Through the Museum” involves twelve co-applicants from eight different universities or institutions; twenty-two collaborators (faculty or professionals such as curators who can use grant funds in a limited way in comparison to PIs) from twenty institutions; and nineteen partner organizations, including the Children’s Movement (South Africa), Fundacja Centrum Cyfrowe (Poland), McCord Museum of Canadian History (Canada), and the Smithsonian Institution (United States). The size of this and other humanities research programs funded via SSHRC has an obvious impact on the nature and orientation of the research carried out.

SSHRC has other, smaller grant programs, including Insight Grants. These have traditionally been grants that individual humanities researchers have applied for to cover the costs of research assistants or travel to archives and conferences. Over the past decade, the focus of SSHRC on larger projects has been reflected in the increasing size of Insight Grants: faculty can now apply for up to Can\$400,000 for a two-to-five-year project, which has led to an increase in research teams applying instead of individuals. In the past, SSHRC research funds could be used to support faculty research by reducing their teaching loads during the term of the project. This component of SSHRC funding was ended in the early 2000s. Due to the multiple changes in the orientation of SSHRC grants outlined above, many humanities researchers working on small or solo projects no longer apply for funding, and not only because their research does not require other colleagues. Receiving SSHRC funding without teaching release can seem to be little more than an addition to workloads rather than

¹¹ Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, “Award Recipients for Partnership Grants: October 2020 Competition,” accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/results-resultats/recipient-recipientaires/2020/pg-sp-eng.aspx>.

a resource to help offset them; the application process is long and difficult; a substantial portion of funds must be targeted to student training; and additional funds are expected to be expended on public outreach (e.g., creating a workshop or staging a conference). While some kinds of humanities projects have benefited from SSHRC's identified future challenge areas and large project grants like Partnership Grants, others are no longer served by an institution with incredible import in Canadian academic life.

New Institutions and Structures

As mentioned above, there are few private institutions in Canada that help the humanities grow and flourish. However, there are several humanities institutes based on Canadian campuses mandated to support humanities research across the disciplines. This includes the Calgary Institute for the Humanities at the University of Calgary and the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University. Two of the most significant institutional additions to the humanities research landscape in the past fifteen years have been the Jackman Institute for the Humanities (University of Toronto) and the Kule Institute for Advanced Study (University of Alberta), both of which are able to draw on large endowments gifted by private donors to support training and research in the humanities (the starting endowment of the Jackman was Can\$22 million—an unprecedented amount for Canadian humanities institutions). Founded in 2007, the Jackman Institute has played an especially important role in supporting and advancing new areas of humanities research. Its recently announced upcoming cycle of annual themes—Absence (2023–24), Undergrounds/Underworlds (2024–25), and Dystopia and Trust (2025–26)—give some sense of the Jackman's scope and ambition.

University research centers and institutes provide one of the most important supports for new humanities research in Canada. There are too large a number to provide anything close to a full account of these here. To take two examples: Concordia University in Montreal has research centers such as the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture, the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, and Technoculture, Art and Games; at the University of Alberta, one can find the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute, the Canadian Literature Centre/Centre de littérature canadienne, the Petrocultures Research Group, and the Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies. This is only a partial list for both campuses. Similar examples can be found on every other campus in Canada.

Throughout the country, in the past two decades several colleges have transitioned to become full-fledged, degree-granting universities (colleges in Canada are similar to community colleges in the US rather than to undergraduate colleges). These include institutions such as Ontario Tech University (Oshawa, Ontario, 2002); Thompson Rivers University (Kamloops, British Columbia, 2005); Vancouver Island University (Nanaimo, British Columbia, 2008); MacEwan University (Edmonton, Alberta, 2009); Mount Royal University (Calgary, Alberta, 2009); and Yukon University (Whitehorse, Yukon, 2020). In the process of these transitions, many of these institutions have added humanities programs—a small but significant addition to the life of the humanities in Canada.

Decolonizing the University

The single most significant change in the tenor of Canadian university life in recent decades has been the growing recognition of its role in attending to the legacy of settler colonialism. There are two linked elements of this recognition within universities. The first is to provide additional, targeted support for research on Indigenous peoples in relation to every dimension of university study. One of the consequences of this institutional recognition has been a substantial increase in faculty positions for Indigenous and Métis researchers, a significant number of which have been based in humanities programs. The second element has been a growing awareness of the need not only to increase the sheer number of Indigenous and Métis researchers and students on campus (to ensure that university campuses broadly represent the communities they serve), but also to actively question the form and even legitimacy of extant institutions of knowledge production. Universities have been quicker to create new faculty positions or to, for example, fund Indigenous student centers and research chairs than to seriously take up the challenge of “decolonizing the university.” Insofar as the latter has occurred in Canada, it has been within humanities and social science departments. Humanities programs and individual research projects must now more consciously and deliberately shape their programs of study in relation to the realities and traumas of settler colonialism. To date, any actual changes to the mechanisms and structures of university research and teaching have been tentative and timid, if they have occurred at all. Efforts to decolonize the university will be important for humanities research moving forward.

Debates over representation, equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) on

Canadian campuses have not been limited to Indigenous peoples. At present, there is an active and vibrant effort to institutionalize EDI in all aspects of university life and decision-making, with particular attention to BIPOC faculty numbers and research conducted on campus. One small structural sign of this has been changes to the federally funded Canada Research Chairs (CRC) program. CRC has mandated equity targets to address the current overrepresentation of men in the program and the underrepresentation of women, racialized minorities, Indigenous peoples, and persons with disabilities.¹² The mandate has had a clear effect, though work remains to be done.

The past decade has also seen changes in the self-understanding of Canadian universities with respect to the publics they serve. There has been greater attention to who gets to participate in research and education, as well as to the overall goals of university education. Recognition of the need for ever-greater attention to equity, diversity, and inclusivity, as well as the need to substantially decolonize curricula and institutional structures, has led to a range of new institutional protocols and commitments on Canadian campuses. While these changes extend well beyond the humanities, the humanities are where the necessity and

The ideas guiding efforts to make Canadian institutions more representative of Canadian society and to recognize more fully the significance of Canada's settler colonial past and present find their origins in research and teaching conducted in humanities departments.

importance of such changes have been most strongly articulated and developed with most force.

It is also safe to say that the ideas guiding efforts to make Canadian institutions more representative of Canadian society and to recognize more fully the significance of Canada's settler colonial past and

present find their origins in research and teaching conducted in humanities departments. Diversity of all kinds—including intellectual diversity and genuinely interdisciplinary research—remain hallmarks of the humanities in Canada, despite the structural challenges they now face and are likely to continue to face moving forward.

¹² Canada Research Chairs, "Establishing Equity Targets for 2021 to 2029," accessed March 15, 2022, <https://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/program-programme/equity-equite/targets-cibles-eng.aspx>.

Conclusion

This report provides a broad sense of the state of humanities in Canada at the present time. Given its length, it cannot speak in detail about specific research projects or areas of humanities research that are distinct and original from other parts of the world. In the main, many of the themes and issues prevalent in research in the Canadian humanities today mirror what is happening in the rest of the Anglo-American academic world. One of the exceptions is Indigenous studies, a field which has developed in relation to the historical specificity of Indigenous experience in Canada and the diverse expressions of Indigeneity in the country. Indigenous peoples constitute 5 percent of the Canadian population (2016), with estimates that they may make up to 6.8 percent of the population by 2041.¹³ (The comparable numbers in the United States and Australia are 2 percent and 3.3 percent respectively). The long struggle by Indigenous people for rights and freedoms, in conjunction with changes made to the Canadian constitution, has led to a formal affirmation by the federal and provincial governments of the inherent right of Indigenous peoples to self-government. The increasing presence of Indigenous peoples in mainstream Canadian cultural and social life, the importance of their voice in political discussions and debates, and the recognition of the significance of the violence and crimes committed against them (up to and including the present day) have led to greater inclusion of Indigenous voices in the Canadian humanities. This has not been without its challenges and is a development still very much in process; nevertheless, it has resulted in vibrant areas of study on more and more Canadian campuses.

One issue worth mentioning by way of conclusion is the impact of international students on the Canadian humanities. At present, Canada is the world's third leading destination for international students. Indeed, the number of international students on Canadian campuses doubled from 2015/16 to 2019/20.¹⁴ These students rarely enroll in the humanities at either the undergraduate or graduate levels. As Canadian universities continue to rely ever more greatly on income from international students, those programs which can attract more are likely to receive greater institutional and financial support.

Despite the significant challenges outlined here, the humanities remain an important and vital component of university life in Canada. The recent

¹³ Statistics Canada, "Projections of the Indigenous Populations and Households in Canada, 2016 to 2041," October 6, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211006/dq211006a-eng.htm?CMP=mstatcan>.

¹⁴ Statistics Canada, "Prior to COVID-19, International Students Accounted for the Growth in Postsecondary Enrolments and Graduates," November 24, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/211124/dq211124d-eng.htm>.

Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences report, *Think Big*, identifies four areas to which the humanities and social sciences make a substantial research contribution: addressing climate crisis, supporting racial justice, advancing reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and dealing with new and emerging technologies. Each of these issues shapes contemporary life in fundamental ways. Each requires the unique insights of the humanities to better understand and conceptualize them and to produce the cultural, political, and social change necessary to allow all Canadians to flourish.

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