

What do you mean... get a real job?

BY ALEIXO MUISE

The old woman peeled her lips into a bitter grin as she topped up my coffee with a repetitiveness that reflected the years spent serving others in her diner. Her eyes scathed my appearance — worn jeans, a faded Xavier sweat shirt, over-used Doc Martins. She pursed her mouth into a frown and stared down at me.

"So you're a grad student?" It was more declaration than question. "Ah, I guess there ain't many jobs out there."

My sigh carried the weight of her opinion. Here was a sweet old immigrant who had slaved the better part of her life to provide her family with a future in Canada. Did she really think I was avoiding life by staying in school, or that academia was some sort of comfortable ivory tower?

The next day, while dissecting the latest earth shattering discovery in *Nature*, I found myself consumed by the old woman's words and her peculiar, curious look as I spoke of life as a graduate student. This seemingly-adoring elderly lady has no idea what grad students do. Come to think of it, neither do my parents, nor most people I know.

The life of a grad student is not easily illustrated by words. Some experience the most carefree and exciting times of their lives, while others compare it to purgatory. For me it's somewhere in between. As students we're not considered real scientists. We're just overworked and relatively underpaid students. I know one can imagine a student being overworked, but is it imaginable that we're underpaid, or for that matter, paid at all.

In science a graduate student's main goal is to complete an independent research project. Thus we are consumed with our research, and yes we do get paid. We spend anywhere from 40 to 80 hours a week at work (the laboratory) like employees of any corporation, without the perks of a "real" job. Now, don't get me wrong, we are working for ourselves when we strive for that elusive doctorate. But others benefit from our labours: namely our supervisors who rely on this work to publish and maintain their own funding and secure their future.

To make matters worse, we are forced to pay exorbitant tuition fees even though we do not take (or are not permitted to take) more than a few required courses. Universities receive large sums of money from the federal government for each graduate student enrolled at their institution.

Graduate students provide the backbone for university research. This work not only fuels the reputation and prestige of a university, but also ensures the institution remains competitive and continues to receive government funding. Every time you hear of an exciting scientific or medical discovery on the news, it's important to realize there were probably a dozen graduate students who slaved for years for that final breakthrough. One rarely reads about their contributions or even about their names mentioned. Even though most grad students do not receive the respect or recognition we deserve, we accept our fate and work even harder in valiant attempt to get ahead, and perhaps to someday get a job.

There are more aspects to graduate school life than research. As our title (grad students) implies, we are students with classes, seminars, and presentations all of which entail an overwhelming assortment of projects, papers, and exams. Although these classes consume many hours and provide the theoretical framework for our research, we are told they must not interfere with our experiments. In order to succeed we must produce quality research while obtaining superior academic grades.

Most universities require students to perform some sort of teaching; for me this has been a pleasant detour on the road to a doctorate in biochemistry. Teaching gives grad students an opportunity to share the knowledge we have amassed over the years. For a graduate student, assisting in teaching an undergraduate course is a unique experience. As graduate students teachers, we are very close in age to our undergraduate students but may have already faced many of the difficult agonizing life decisions these students soon have to make. This creates a climate that encourages close interactions and fosters the development of meaningful relationships. Personally, I have found teaching to be one of the most rewarding aspects of grad school.

Undoubtedly the most difficult reality of graduate school is dealing with the uncertainty concerning the future. As generation X'ers (whatever that really means), we know only too well the bleak prospects of finding a job, forget a career. We were all told, possibly assured, that by the time of our convocation there would be an urgent need for professors, or at least for over-qualified scientists. Instead we are seeing the un-

believable: numerous highly-qualified, well-published, dedicated professors are losing their grants and experiencing their own very uncertain future. We constantly hear of Canada's commitment to research and development and it's vital importance for the future, but now funding is being drastically cut. I have to wonder if the decision makers in Ottawa know that research is the only way for a country to stay competitive. Do they realize that a brain drain to the United States and Europe will have dire ramifications that make take years to undo?

So what does the future hold? After completing four to five years for an undergraduate degree, two or three years for a Master's degree, and four to six years for a Ph.D., and having succeeded in

publishing your work, the next step is called the post-doctoral fellowship (or post-doc). This wonderful title allows us to work as an independent researcher under the evidently watchful tutelage of an established professor. The reward for 10-14 years of schooling is a job that pays approximately \$25 000 a year depending on the granting agency and generosity of the supervisor. Hardly seems a fitting salary for this level of education, especially considering that many people our age are starting families. Furthermore, it's probable we will have to leave Canada (most end up in the United States) to find a worthy funded project. To make matters worse, we are now expected to complete at least two post-docs each lasting over two years before

we are deemed suitable to even apply for a professorship.

When I look into the future I sometimes think I'd be better off in the "real" world. I'm filled with apprehension and uncertainty wondering where academia will take me. Could that cynical old woman be right? Am I just fooling myself and avoiding life in grad school?

Then I realize I'm drawn to the scientific pursuit; the challenge of the unknown, the rewards of discovery. The world of science and grad school is a strange and confusing place filled with all the problems and obstacles of the "real" world. I guess if grad school doesn't work out I can always ask the old woman for a job — I'm certainly trained to top up coffee cups.

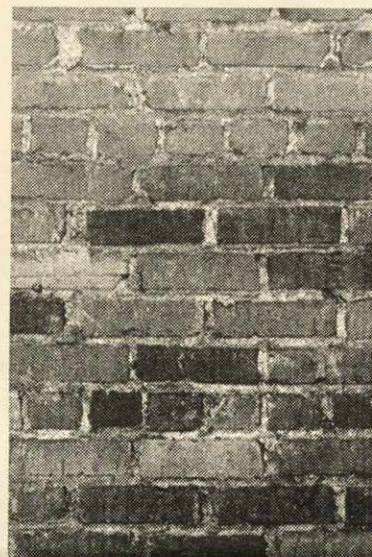
In defense of elitism

BY ABHI SAMANT

Editor's Note: This piece was originally published in the column "From the Mind of Abhi", featured each month in TUNS News, the Student Newspaper for the Technical University of Nova Scotia. Abhi Samant is a 4th year Industrial Engineering Student at TUNS. "In Defense of Elitism" appeared in the October Issue of TUNS News.

I have been recently flipping through the various papers in Ontario and there is rarely a day that passes without an article or letter complaining about the high costs of tuition. They state that education costs are becoming so high that many students will not attend university. In my honest opinion this is not necessarily a bad thing.

I believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity to attend university but the present system does not allow for it because of a lack of high entrance standards. If you meet the minimum requirements and have the money you get to go to university. Funding is given in block grants so the more students present, the less money there is per student and we get higher tuition costs. There are simply too many students attending university acquiring skills that are inadequate for the work force. Many of these students would be better served by community college or trade school. Of course that does not apply to TUNS students because of the practical nature of our courses. However, we are the exception and not the rule.



If you think I am wrong, go to Dalhousie and check out their calendar filled with oh so many useful courses or observe their students struggling to use Windows.

Luckily there is a simple solution to the problem.

Raise the entrance requirements to attend university, especially in courses where there is an excess of people in that field (i.e. Liberal Arts).

Of course people will say this is unfair and makes university elitist. Guess what? Universities are suppose to be elitist. Only the best and the brightest should go. The present system is basically a tax break for middle and upper middle class kids. The parents get a subsidized university education for their kids. Those who are poor are unlikely to attend university because of the high costs involved. A minority of Canadians attend university yet everyone has to pay for the costs of higher education. Shouldn't we demand the best return on our money?

We should be using universities to help stimulate the economy and create jobs. Tax money should not be spent for students' self exploration. If you want to find yourself, buy a ticket to Europe but if you want to make a positive contribution to society attend university. By raising standards and cutting enrollments, the cost of tuition can be sufficiently dropped so those who are worthy, no matter how rich or poor they are, have an equal shot at attending university.

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