Innovation by Design Focus Group

SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND POSTDOCTORAL AFFAIRS

QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY

Roundtables on Innovation: Event Coordination and Goals

The Innovation by Design event at Queen's University comprised of a one-time, 3-hour event. 20 students, who volunteered to participate through an open call to all SSHRC programs, were divided into four groups to engage in a roundtable discussion. Each table was led by a student facilitator and had a note-taker to capture the conversation. Students came from the following programs: Sociology, Art History, Cultural Studies, Political Studies, Education, English Literature and Creative Writing, Geography and Planning, Global Development, History, Law, Mining, Political and Legal Thought, and Psychology.

To open the conversation, students introduced themselves, briefly described their research, and what drew them to this event. The facilitators then transitioned to addressing seven questions created by the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs. The questions were designed to gain insight into participants' perceptions of innovation and what it meant to them and/or their discipline, the role of SSHRC disciplines in innovation, what innovation can look like, and what tools/training they need to support them concerning innovation. After these small group discussions, all tables shared their findings with the larger group, inviting further discussion among the students. This discussion helped to identify key themes, recommendations, and other issues of importance.

The goal of this event was to better understand perceptions of "innovation" among students and identify opportunities for support that CAGS, SSHRC, and Queen's University can develop to help students see themselves as "innovators" and better prepare them for careers in which innovation (or the driving of change) is an intended outcome. This approach was chosen knowing that many Humanities, Social Science, and Arts students at Queen's are uncomfortable with the idea of "innovation," particularly in the terms outlined in the joint CAGS-SSHRC call. These discussions were simultaneously an attempt to better understand these perceptions, how to address them, how to provide better support.

Major Themes by Question

The remainder of the report provides the questions posed and the major themes that arose in response. Following the questions are a series of general recommendations for consideration that emerged as most significant out of the conversation.

Question 1. What does the word "innovation" mean to you?

For this question, participants were first encouraged to explain in their own terms what innovation means. They were then provided with the SSHRC/CAGS definition of innovation as outlined in the call and they were asked to discuss this further. Some points of discussion focused on how the definition is different or like their initial thoughts on innovation. Some main themes that were common in this question are:

1. Innovation is progress: One of the main aspects the participants talked about is how innovation is linked to improvement and moving forward, and can be thought of as breaking barriers, improving past mistakes, and making things better for the present and the future.

2. Challenging the definition: Students found the emphasis and fronting of "product" in the SSHRC/CAGS call to be challenging. In the context of "innovation" this word is often linked to something tangible and able to be monetized. Participants talked about the struggle with the need to monetize ideas/things which can lead to inequalities. Many would have preferred a decentering of "product." There was a more positive discussion around the idea of "adding value." This, while subjective, was more inviting of a range of meaning.

3. Forms of innovation: Participants explained that although innovation can be monetized, it is not always tied to money or technology. The main element "innovation" conveys is novelty and creating things that are valuable to people. Most participants discussed how innovation is part of everyday life and that innovative potential can be found everywhere someone intends to look. Themes like new ways of thinking as innovative (or critical and creative thinking, problem solving, etc.) and innovative pedagogy were brought up. Thinking about innovation in these terms can help students see their work and abilities as able to create positive change.

4. Dangers of innovation: One table discussed how innovation is not always a good thing and that caution should be taken when discussing what is "innovative" and what is not. Who/what might something that is "innovative" leave out or exclude? What damage can innovation do? We should not be creating something new for the sake of newness. What becomes devalued through innovation? For example, the use of AI and the implications for artists and writers. When thinking about innovation, if often conjures up ideas of the "newer" and "better." Yet, innovation should be a reflective practice as much as it is about looking forward.

5. Considerations: Some of the considerations that the participants talked about were the need to operationalize something before measuring it. Funding was also brought up, as to be innovative often requires funds and time. Participants also talked about how innovation can be thought of as a "buzz" word in some ways, and a "modern" word and that it is borrowed from the sciences.

Question 2. What can innovation look like in your discipline?

For this question, participants were asked about innovation and what it looks like in their discipline. Participants talked about different forms of innovation that have come up from their disciplines. For example, one participant from History described oral history as a data tool among African societies as a form of innovation. Other themes that emerged included:

1. Addressing people's needs: Participants explained that understanding society is a key part of innovation in their fields. The outcome should be aligned with what is needed – it must be responsive. This might be achieved through consultation, community engagement, and mobilization as part of research or research translation – these are helpful tools, and for some fields, innovative ways of working. Collaboration and consultation should not be underestimated when it comes to being innovative in almost any field.

2. Creating spaces: Participants talked about how innovation is about creating new dialogue and creating spaces for new experiences. Products, policy, strategies etc. do not have to be the only kinds of things that are innovative and add value to society.

3. Innovation is interdisciplinary: Participants explained that innovation can bridge disciplinary divides and integrate different fields of work into problem-solving. They also explained that applying different methodologies in new domains can be a form of innovation. They noted also that this can be challenging, given that students are so often divided between Faculties and have little opportunity to come together and learn.

4. Attitudes and Perceptions: Innovation can be about innovating attitudes and perceptions. This should not be undervalued, especially in the world today.

Question 3. Can you think of any examples of innovation driven by SSHRC disciplines?

Students were encouraged to think broadly about examples of innovation driven by SSHRC disciplines (not just those within their own fields of study).

1. Examining the discipline: Students emphasized the need to look within their fields and see whether they can innovate something that can make a difference to how their field conducts itself. Each participant explained how their field has come up with different innovations.

   Examples of innovation included healing programs in Indigenous communities for those that would otherwise go through the traditional judicial system. Although these new mechanisms are still run through the provincial system, they have created alternative paths. While this was viewed as a step forward, it was also noted that the program has received mixed review, and does not account for other issues in these communities.

   Another example is the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research led by Dr Max Liboiron (at Memorial University). The lab is led by an Indigenous PI, who is not from a SSHRC discipline, but who brings Indigenous ways of knowing to his research; he also brings in grad students and postdocs from outside of his field into his lab to collaborate and work together. Such interdisciplinary spaces were seen as highly valuable and as something that should be a model used more often.

Interdisciplinary programs at universities were brought up. Such programs could be seen as a way to create more dialogues between fields (even if only within the SSHRC disciplines). However, it was also noted that given the sometimes-entrenched nature of disciplinary silos at universities, even a program that is intended to embrace interdisciplinarity can still feel disconnected.

2. Interdisciplinary work is innovative: Interdisciplinarity came up throughout the event. Some participants explained how SSHRC disciplines were oftentimes inherently interdisciplinary, more so than other domains. For example, a participant from Art History explained that people in Art Conservation use scientific methods to analyze and conserve works of art. This participant explained that questioning things and integrating other fields and approaches can be a form of innovation in the SSHRC disciplines. More such methodological approaches would be valuable.

3. Limitation of innovation: Students also stressed that innovation can be limited by a number of factors, especially as students, but also to some degree later in their careers. Key limiting factor impacting those in SSHRC fields is time and money (funding).

Question 4. What can researchers in SSHRC disciplines specifically offer to discussions about innovation that might make a different contribution than other disciplinary fields, such as NSERC and CIHR?

Students were encouraged to think critically about what Humanities, Social Sciences, and Arts can bring to innovation. For example, what specific skills, outlooks, or training do they have that can create more meaningful dialogues, outcomes, or conversations.

1. Understanding others: Participants talked about how SSHRC fields have to do more with sense-making of societal issues and critical thinking about what concerns people/society. This is the key to what they can contribute, especially in areas of innovation traditionally rooted in NSERC and CIHR fields. For example, SSHRC disciplines can help work with community, delving into how innovation and change will impact people for the better or worse. One example of this given was mining operations/research teams and support to help develop more responsible practices and understand local community needs. Mining operations are historically disruptive to the local human/animal/natural environment.

2. Valuing of the Humanities and Social Sciences: A number of participants felt that their fields were generally undervalued at all levels. They see this as tied to research outputs. Those within NSERC and CIHR are often more visible, or their value better understood (or more immediate). For example, healthcare outcomes, scientific advances, technology, and the ability to monetize outcomes are more tangible and given priority in our society today. The value of research outcomes in SSHRC fields might be less obvious. Tied into this valuing was funding. Students noted the great deal of funding that goes into these other fields. One of the discussion tables talked about the “lack of confidence in researchers” and that what other people think can affect how they are

perceived as a discipline. They explained that SSHRC researchers better societies and contribute equally as other fields.

3. Importance of history: One table discussed the importance of understanding history in relation to innovation. History allows for the long view of events and change over time. It can show what impacts significant innovations have had and puts current events into the global and/or historical perspective. Innovation similarly needs to take the long view – what has happened in the past (in technology development or industry, for example), and what the implications are for moving forward.

Question 5. Why might some students in social sciences, humanities, and art disciplines not see themselves as innovators as we've discussed or as SSHRC/CAGS defines? How could students in SSHRC disciplines see themselves as innovators?

1. Need to see actionable work: Participants explained that they want to be able to apply their ideas and see some positive contribution from their work. This will make their work more innovative to them. How can opportunities for this be created?

2. Funding and acceptance: As mentioned previously, the lack of funding in these disciplines makes researchers feel less innovative than researchers in other fields. Participants also mentioned that the social stigma of studying under any of these disciplines makes it hard for them to feel innovative as there is constant frustration associated with feeling undervalued. This often is related to the pay gap as well with other fields.

3. Changing pedagogy: Students noted how valuable interdisciplinary courses could be. There should be more opportunities for collaboration and conversation across disciplines. Working with others on shared topics to put into practice how different fields can work together towards a shared end goal, whether in terms of a policy, product, program, etc, would demonstrate shared interests, expand student learning, and show how collaboration can lead to stronger outcomes. Students wondered whether NSERC and CIHR researchers would feel the same about such collaborative courses.

4. Start the conversation earlier: One student noted that talking about what innovation means and how students are innovators across disciplines at a younger age, or earlier in their academic career, could be powerful. Perhaps it would be more effective to talk about innovation in different terms - as positive change, as addressing need, as new research, as changing perceptions, etc. Instilling the value of SSHRC disciplines as innovative would instill confidence and reflection in the importance of their work and the contribution it makes to their field, the community, and beyond.

Question 6. What tools or support do you need to prepare you for a career in which driving change and innovation is an intended outcome?

1. Community outreach: Training in community outreach and/or networking/establishing partnerships could be helpful for some students. This might support knowledge mobilization, which is a form of innovation, allowing students to put their work into action, or to apply their skills and training to new contexts.

2. New training opportunities: Some participants explained that their field lacks enough internship and workshop opportunities. Increasing opportunities for such experiential learning can help in training, applying their skills and knowledge in innovative ways, and ultimately support them in the job search. Students need to be able to see themselves in diverse career paths and explore how their graduate training and knowledge are valuable for employers.

3. Creating interdisciplinary opportunities: As evident in this report, the need for more interdisciplinary, collaborative opportunities is important for students. This might include interdisciplinary courses or co-curricular programs, but also simply knowing of opportunities in other departments/faculties can be helpful for students to develop their ideas and improve their research outcomes. For example, one student explained that having an interdisciplinary journal can be more helpful than having one journal for each field.

4. Funding: The importance of funding was raised again in the context of this question. This was a key concern for participants. Students noted that having financial support is the one important tool for researchers to be able to sustain what they are doing, be more confident in their outputs, and understand their work is valued.

5. Innovate pedagogy: One table discussed the need to redevelop the way we teach to allow for more innovation among students. Interdisciplinary courses came up again as an example that would help students to see the way other disciplines do work and explore how together they can approach the same challenge from different perspectives. Participants noted repeatedly the siloed nature of the university and programs as a barrier.

   More leeway in course final projects (outside of the traditional essay), was also discussed as a way to encourage innovative thinking among students.

   The idea of “failure” was also brought up – how can students be responsibly encouraged to take risks and see risk-taking as positive? Risk-taking is scary for many students given the potential outcome of failure, yet failure is often a part of research. Why are we so afraid of failure? The fear of failure in academia may be impacting innovation. More conversations around healthy risk-taking in academia could be beneficial. Tied into this

was discussion around creating programming and learning opportunities that are less focused on grading, giving space to focus on learning outcomes in a different way.

6. More mentorship and support: Participants noted that having non-academic mentors, or even mentors within their field who are not their supervisors could be helpful. Providing students with more support can build confidence in their abilities, and support their personal and academic development.

Question 7. If Queen's were to offer courses or certificate programs in driving innovation that you could take while completing your degree, would you be interested in participating? What would you hope to gain/experience from such a course?

1. Improve course experience: Participants indicated that having a significant discount (free or almost free) for a certificate/course on an innovation would be appealing. Others indicated that they would value a credit on their transcript for engaging in such a course.

2. Improve networking: Participants mentioned the value of learning how to build networks and connections with individuals from different disciplines. Such a course would provide that opportunity.

3. Reasons to not engage: Some students indicated that if the course was in lieu of a course for the program, they would not take it. Further, a number of students indicated they would be concerned about increasing their workloads by participating if the course were outside of their degree requirements.

4. Alternative ideas: Weaving innovation and interdisciplinary conversations into course curriculum would be beneficial. Increasing the number of guest lectures or workshops on innovation and what it means/looks like within specific disciplines.

5. Ideas for consideration: Were a course to be offered, its framing would be very important. If advertised as focused on the idea of innovation (or even the way the CAGS/SSHRC call presents innovation), they likely would not participate as they would have trouble seeing themselves as relevant to the conversation. Such a course would have to be carefully constructed and communicated to be clear how it is of value and relevance to SSHRC students, or how interdisciplinarity would work out.

Recommendations and Next Steps

Based on the conversation that the above questions elicited, the following are areas for consideration:

1. Defining and Contextualizing: Greater consideration should be given to how "innovation" is defined, the forms it can take, and how innovation is discussed for it to be viewed in more inclusive terms. The emphasis on "new" and "products" should be tempered. Reframing the concept around "adding value" or "creating positive change" are more in line with student thinking about innovation.

2. Teaching and learning: Creating more support/encouraging innovative forms of pedagogy can help students to understand how their research is innovative and empower them to see themselves as making positive change through their work. This can come in the form of interdisciplinary curricular courses, or co-curricular programming, changing how we measure learning outcomes (less emphasis on grades), and creating alternative projects for students to undertake in courses.

3. Innovation should be accessible, especially for individuals who are not in graduate programs.

4. Increasing opportunities to work with communities: Community-engaged research is a great avenue for innovative research. Universities should explore how to build more bridges with communities to help students apply their research and training in new contexts.

5. Increasing interdisciplinary opportunities: Students are looking for opportunities to learn and collaborate across disciplines. Universities should explore more such programming and events to allow students to come together, either informally or formally through curricular or co-curricular program and events.

6. Increasing student funding: With the rising cost of living, students are facing increased financial stress. The focus on these issues makes it difficult to focus on engaging in training, developing new pedagogies for courses they might teach, or participating in opportunities that might help them to develop as scholars and for careers after graduation. There is no space to think about "innovation." Financial restrictions and limitations are a barrier. Financial stress was coupled with affordable housing, access to healthcare, support for students with dependents, and opportunities for professional development.

7. Valuing the Humanities and Social Sciences: Participants would like to see increased appreciation and recognition for the work they do – within universities and society at large. Their work and the skills they develop through the graduate education helps lead to better futures for our communities.