



Federation event summary report

People, Place and Possibility: Cities and the Humanities and Social Sciences 2016 Annual Conference | Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences November 9, 2016 | University of Toronto Hart House

On November 9, the Federation hosted its 2016 Annual Conference, “People, Place and Possibility: Cities and the Humanities and Social Sciences” in partnership with the University of Toronto at Hart House. Over 100 delegates, including faculty, community members, students and funders came together to explore the role of the humanities and social sciences (HSS) in addressing pressing urban issues such as pluralism, democracy, innovation, reconciliation and research impacts. The following is a brief review of the highlights from this event. See all conference videos, including *Big Thinking*, panels and the lunch keynote [here](#), and view the conference photo album [here](#)!

Big Thinking lecture and response panel

Julian Agyeman, Professor of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning at Tufts University, opened the conference with a *Big Thinking* lecture entitled “[Just sustainabilities in cities: Re-imagining e/quality, living within limits.](#)”

Agyeman’s wide-ranging lecture touched on sustainability in cities and argued that environmental and social issues are better dealt with together, as “there is a relationship between how we treat each other and how we treat the environment.” HSS has an important role to play in uncovering and discussing the social and cultural issues behind environmental concerns such as climate change. According to Agyeman, “we have the science of sustainability. We know what we need to do, but we’re not doing it. This is where social science and humanities comes in.”

A [response panel](#) addressing the contributions of HSS to building pluralistic and democratic cities followed the *Big Thinking* lecture.

- Professor of History at Université de Montréal **Michèle Dagenais** gave a historical perspective on the development of cities, describing past processes of suburbanization and the current gentrification of old central neighbourhoods.



- Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University **Cyndy Baskin** argued that Indigenous peoples come to cities for better education and for better lives, but face many challenges including racism and a lack of services. Baskin argued that more research on urban Indigenous communities is essential, as research findings will shape future services for these communities.
- The humanities and social sciences tell new stories about why the past matters for thinking about the future, according to **Pamela Klassen**, Vice-Dean of Undergraduate Education, Faculty of Arts & Science at the University of Toronto, who stated that, “cities are infrastructures for memory.”
- **Shauna Sylvester**, Professor of Professional Practice and Director of the Centre for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University, argued that universities need to be more engaged with their communities and discussed the creation of the SFU Public Square, an initiative focused on community connections, and its efforts to combat isolation and disconnection in the city.

Keynote lecture

Co-Director of Doblin Canada and lecturer at the University of Toronto **Zahra Ebrahim**'s engaging keynote lecture, “[Human-centred cities: co-designing systems with citizens](#),” explored how to engage



citizens in designing cities and allow communities to guide projects by challenging the orthodoxies that only trained professionals can design buildings or make policy. Another orthodoxy Ebrahim challenged was that students should be evaluated using quantitative metrics.

Instead, she introduces students to public consultations and challenges them to connect with people, evaluating their performance instead on the qualitative metrics of empathy, insight and effort. Students report that the experience is frightening and unsettling, but extremely rewarding. Ebrahim's guiding rule for urban design is to allow participants to guide the process and to “make things people want.” According to Ebrahim, students trained in HSS are valuable because they not only know how to do good research, but are also empathetic and can connect with clients.

Concurrent workshops

Strengthening innovation through scholarship and community

This [workshop](#) explored the role of HSS in innovation and touched on the Federation's [submission](#) to the federal government's innovation agenda consultations. **Richard Hawkins**, a Professor in the Science, Technology and Society program at the University of Calgary, opened the session, arguing that everything that is known about innovation comes from HSS and that “...we as practitioners ‘have to make a case for ourselves and the work that we do by using [policy makers’] language’.” Hawkins pointed out that OECD countries are now producing more intangible products, such as services, which are closely aligned with the “social knowledge” studied in HSS.



The innovation agenda and the role of HSS was the focus of Hawkins' co-presenter, **David Wolfe**, Professor of Political Science at University of Toronto Mississauga and Co-Director of the Innovation Policy Lab. Wolfe explained that HSS have an important role to play in innovation because these are the researchers who compile the evidence needed for innovation to take place. And that in the digital era, when the most important skill is being able to write creatively, this is a skill that comes with an HSS education.

Reconciliation in the city: The role of the humanities and social sciences

Focusing on reconciliation in urban contexts, this workshop explored the roles that universities, scholarly associations and individual researchers can play in working towards reconciliation with Indigenous peoples. **Cyndy Baskin**, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University, chaired the workshop.

- **Chris Andersen**, Interim Dean of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, reflected on the role of universities, stating that his home institution had engaged in sincere and systematic discussions around reconciliation and the university. Andersen argued that there needs to be strong relationships between universities, municipalities and Indigenous communities, including traditional landholders, as “whatever reconciliation looks like, it needs to be co-created.”
- Professor of Sociology and Anthropology at Carleton University and President of the Canadian Anthropology Society **Donna Patrick** shared some key observations on ways to ensure Indigenous participation in conferences. These include representation on organizing committees, having local committees with Indigenous peoples at high decision-making levels, and supporting local Indigenous peoples through art, film, or by using small business services such as local catering.
- **Karyn Recollet** of the Women & Gender Studies Institute at the University of Toronto explored individual actions and reconciliation, exploring relationship-building on the land and ways to re-map urban Indigenous space, such as through Indigenous language street signs in Toronto.

Demonstrating the community impacts of the humanities and social sciences

David Phipps, Director of Research Services at York University, chaired this [workshop](#) examining how to assess and demonstrate the impacts of HSS research. For Phipps, knowledge mobilization is one of the ways to achieve impacts, and collaboration between researchers and non-academic partners is essential.

- **Tim Kenyon**, Professor of Philosophy and Associated Dean of Arts at the University of Waterloo, discussed the Federation's approach to impact and key elements of its [working paper](#), which reviews ways HSS researchers can understand, communicate and assess the contributions of HSS research in diverse areas such as scholarship, capacity, the economy, society and culture, and practice and policy.
- Speaking from the point of view of a funder, **Michelynn Laflèche**, Director of Research, Public Policy and Evaluation at United Way Toronto, pointed out that HSS research is critical to program design and argued that sustained and meaningful partnerships between community organizations and HSS researchers are essential in creating community impact.



- **Annalee Yassi** from the School of Population and Public Health at the University of British Columbia explored how universities and communities can work better together through the example of the Art for Social Change project that brings together artists, scholars and students. Yassi emphasized meaningful participation with partners, and the importance of not exploiting those who may not have adequate resources, as well as maintaining an awareness of what the partnership is trying to achieve.

Federal review of “Fundamental Science”

- The day’s [final session](#) featured a discussion of the 2016 federal Fundamental Science Review launched in June by Minister of Science Kirsty Duncan. **Stephen Toope**, President of the Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences and Director of the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, outlined the Federation’s consultation with the HSS community in developing its submission, as well as some of its key messages. These include increasing the amount of federal research funding available to HSS scholars, creating a new fund dedicated to supporting multidisciplinary research to tackle large and complex societal challenges, increased support for Indigenous researchers, and strengthening the governance of granting agencies through increased representation of leaders from the research community.
- The conversation was continued by **Vivek Goel**, Vice President of Research and Innovation, University of Toronto, who outlined key recommendations such as the need to continue to support investigator-led (as opposed to government-led) research, reinvestment in granting councils with increased support for SSHRC, better inter-agency cooperation and streamlined application programs, dedicated funding for large-scale international projects, and support for under-represented groups. During the discussion, audience members discussed early career researchers, federal-provincial roles in research and teaching, and diversity in Canada Research Chairs.

For questions or comments on the 2016 Annual Conference or to inquire about other Federation events, please contact federation@ideas-idees.ca.

