

Opinion: A fresh approach to higher education in Quebec

Let's reset the conversation: Our collective rethink has to go beyond questions of funding

By Alan Shepard, The Gazette January 4, 2013

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This new year will provide a good opportunity for a reset of the conversation on the future of higher education in Quebec.

The dialogue has been polarized for some time, creating the perception that our society is deeply divided on the issue. Yet I view higher education as an evolving ecosystem in which we share a common concern for the well-being of our current and future generations and that benefits both the individual learner and the broader community.

My hope is that at the education summit this winter, and in the ensuing months, we apply Quebec's characteristically progressive approach to social policy and come together to articulate viable, long-term solutions.

Quebec universities are certainly under near-term funding pressure with the government of Quebec's retroactive \$124-million cut to operating grants in our current fiscal year. Our situation has suddenly morphed from coping with chronic underfunding to real concern about a trend toward the long-term public defunding of Quebec universities.

Unfortunately, this is part of a global phenomenon, as fiscal pressures on universities and governments are rising around the world. As a society, we have to find ways to reinforce and diversify our public and private funding of universities. In doing so, we will have to be vigilant to protect their values, academic freedom, teaching excellence and research integrity.

Our collective rethink has to go beyond questions of funding. We need to determine how we can best adapt to the rapidly changing global dynamics in higher education, while ensuring that our universities remain socially relevant, financially sustainable and accessible to the majority of the Quebec population.

Global demand for higher education far outweighs its supply. Higher education is more transnational than ever, and so is the market for top achievers. Students, teachers, researchers and professionals — the pillars of competing knowledge-based economies around the world — are increasingly mobile.

In Montreal, we have a tremendous advantage in navigating these global currents. With its critical mass of universities and research centres, Montreal is one of North America's most important capitals of knowledge and expertise. Our universities — our people — are thought-leaders in domains ranging from the arts and humanities to life sciences, engineering and business, and this role must be preserved and nourished.

To succeed, we have to do better in supporting first-generation university students to ensure that enrolment leads inevitably to graduation. Looking ahead to life after university, initiatives such as Concordia University's Graduate and Professional Skills training program show students how to plan, manage projects and communicate effectively, easing their transition into a career.

Another priority is to modernize the 19th-century university model to sync up better with the academic, economic and demographic forces of the 21st century. That means creating space for interdisciplinary study and zone-based education where students are encouraged to explore entrepreneurship and innovation and test their ideas while they are still at university. We all need to be engaged in the e-learning revolution that is under way around the world.

A good example of this type of experiential learning is the academically diverse undergraduate team from our Faculty of Engineering and Computer Science at Concordia that won the Canadian Satellite Design Challenge, and that will see its satellite launched in 2013. Space Concordia's project was student-designed and -led, faculty-advised, university-incubated and industry-supported.

Urban universities like Concordia are deeply integrated into their surrounding communities. They are superbly situated geographically and socially to promote a scintillating two-way flow of knowledge and expertise. They illustrate how connected universities are to wider society.

Concordia's integration with the community is also shown by our linguistic diversity. Although Concordia is an English-language university, about 44 per cent of our students speak a language other than English at home. One in four speaks French at home. Concordia is a university for Montreal and for Quebec.

Universities are equally important to both personal advancement and the public good. Let's work together to ensure our universities have access to the sustainable funding and student-accessibility resources they need, and allow them to develop the innovative strategies that will carry all of society forward.

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