

Opinion: Two-tier university education isn't the answer

By Alan Shepard, Lucie Lequin and Maria E. Peluso, Special to The Gazette

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We are glad to see that the conversation about the future of Quebec's universities is sparking some creative thinking on the topic, but Henry Aubin's suggestion that we impose a two-tier system of higher education is not the right way forward.

In [a column this week](#), Mr. Aubin suggests that Quebec create two classes of universities — higher-funded institutions oriented toward research, and lower-funded universities that would focus only on offering a solid academic program.

Using Maclean's magazine's ranking of Canadian universities as a basis for creating these two tiers, he puts McGill University and Université de Montréal in the first category, where they would "actively pursue excellence," and relegates universities such as Concordia and Université du Québec à Montréal to the second, where they would "not aim for stardom."

This is an old idea better suited to an archaic concept of higher education than to the model of an innovative and engaged university of the 21st century.

Its first false premise is that research is somehow disconnected from teaching and learning. In modern practice, research, teaching and learning are integrated in a mutually reinforcing relationship that is key to preparing our students for life beyond university.

University research enhances teaching by engaging our students' creative thinking to better prepare them for the transition to professional life or the workforce in general. We need active research laboratories, for example, to properly educate and train students in the natural and physical sciences. Research moves fast, propelling society forward, and to constrain it at any level is a mistake. Furthermore, our students tell us that they want access to the research process, and as early as possible.

In higher education, research and training go hand in hand at both specialized institutions and comprehensive universities such as Concordia. Our more than 1,700 academics contribute ideas and conduct research that an independent study has shown is a powerful force in the development of Quebec. We must support their vital role, not suppress it.

Concordia's research profile has risen over the past 10 years as funding agencies respond to the amazing contributions our researchers are making to the betterment of

society. Concordia has outperformed leading research institutions nationally in a number of areas. Last August, an academic-research rankings report by Toronto-based Higher Education Strategy Associates placed Concordia ninth in the country in arts, social sciences and humanities, and 20th in natural sciences and engineering in terms of the impact of our research. This is one reason why we have 7,300 students who choose Concordia for its 100 graduate programs.

Public and private investment in research is critical to the greater good. In 2011, Concordia completed \$80 million worth of research-infrastructure centres on time and on budget, funded under Canada's Knowledge Infrastructure Program. Our Perform Centre, Centre for Structural and Functional Genomics, and Solar Simulator-Environmental Chamber are innovative research facilities that are used every day to teach our students and give them the skills they will need to succeed beyond the campus.

Mr. Aubin's second failed premise is that the Maclean's university rankings are a good basis on which to make judgments about the worth of our institutions of higher education. There has been much debate on the relevance of the Maclean's rankings, but a widely held view is that they are based on parameters that simply underscore the chronic underfunding of Quebec universities when compared with their counterparts in the rest of Canada.

Our students demand and deserve a first-rate education, with access to the creative ideas and leading-edge tools that will allow all of them to pursue excellence and succeed not just locally but globally. At a time when Quebec is seeking to be a global knowledge leader, it is imperative that research remain a vital part of teaching and learning at our universities. We need to build on that relationship with university funding structures that foster creativity and innovation in higher education.

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