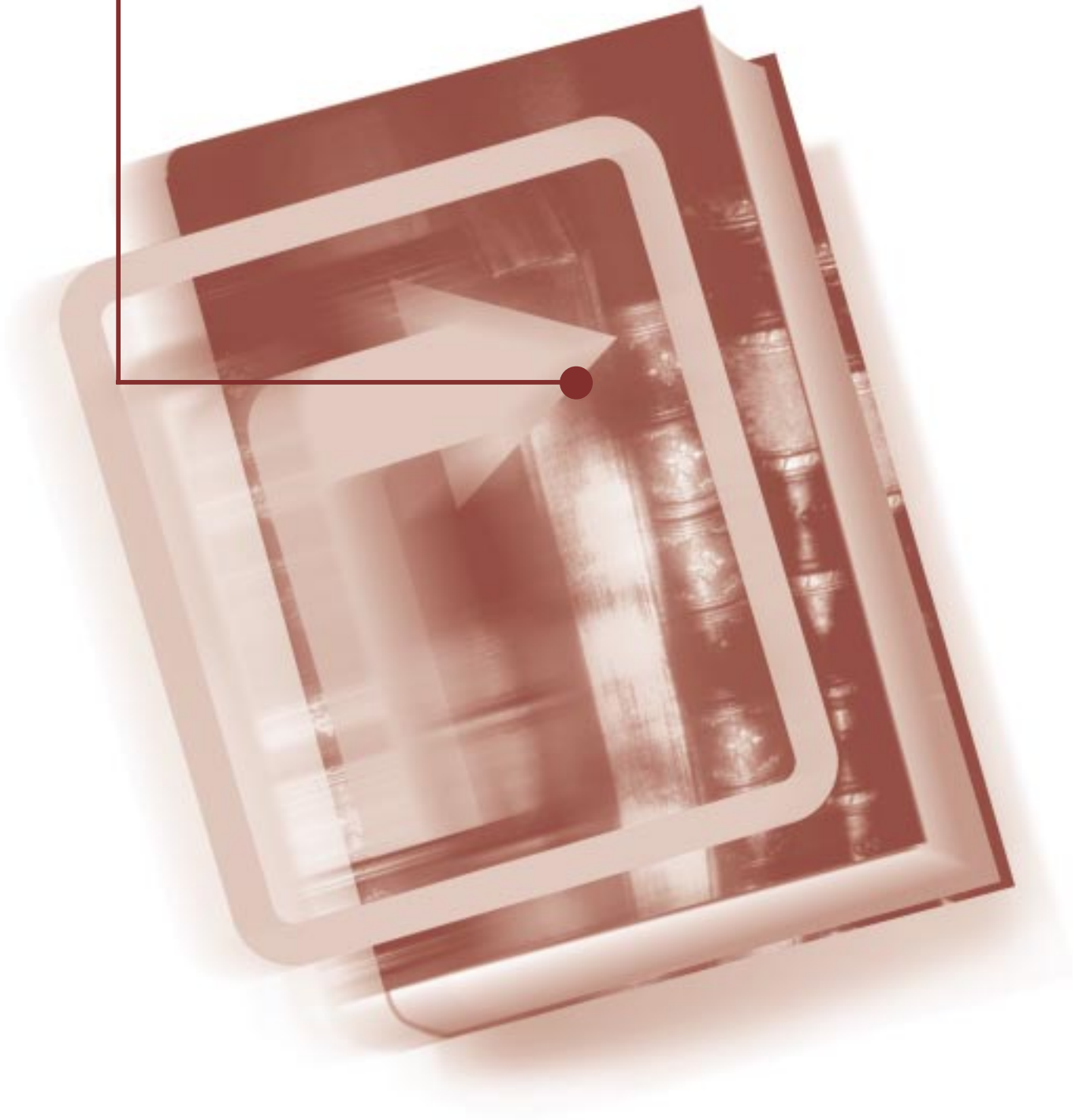


**CONSULTATION PAPER**  
on Government Policy Towards Québec Universities



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# Introduction

This consultation paper is a follow-up to the one published at the beginning of this year and discussed during the first phase of this operation. It redefines and reformulates some of the questions studied at that time, but also examines others that emerged during the meetings last spring. It also seeks to highlight some of the deficiencies identified in the first consultation paper, notably with regard to the international dimension of university activities and the growing importance of graduate studies.

It is obvious that the many facets of university life form an integrated whole that cannot easily be separated to everyone's satisfaction. Nevertheless, to ensure that the discussion could proceed smoothly, the various questions had to be arranged in order of importance and grouped into themes. Such was the intent of the document entitled *Universities and the Future*. This paper takes the same approach, but attempts to incorporate the concerns expressed during the meetings last spring.

A number of organizations closely linked to the world of higher education were able to state their case during the first phase of the consultation. The opinions expressed, the questions raised and the views exchanged formed the basis for this second paper. It is hoped that this document, through the contribution of all those consulted, will make it possible to pursue the discussion and define the essential aspects of a "government policy regarding Québec universities," to use the terms found in the subtitle of the first document. The main chapter headings from the first consultation paper have been kept to ensure consistency throughout this undertaking.

Concerns about government intervention in areas relating to the internal management of institutions rather than to the general focus of the "university system" were expressed during the first phase of the consultation. In practice, it is difficult, if not impossible, to draw a clear line between these different areas and to reach a consensus on how to define them as unequivocally as possible.

The fact that the Ministère de l'Éducation has spent the last year asking universities what they expect from a government policy statement on higher education does not mean that the Government is shirking its responsibilities in this regard. In its role as representative of the public interest, the Government cannot avoid indicating its preferences, at least with regard to certain questions that it believes are of great importance to all Quebecers.

Moreover, the Government must devote its attention to other major public services and mandates and attempt to fit each issue into a list of priorities it feels will best reflect the general interest. The Government has asked universities to make recommendations about what they think should be included in a government policy statement on higher education. It seems only natural, therefore, that universities should expect the Government to produce a paper in which it commits itself to a certain number of measures that reflect public expectations in this regard.

In addition, this government policy must reflect the remarkable accomplishments of the Québec university system. It should be remembered, for instance, that Québec leads the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in the percentage of young people who have earned a bachelor's degree. Although not among the leaders in the number of graduate diplomas awarded, Québec universities have made significant progress in this area (between 1987 and 1995, the number of master's degrees and Ph.D's conferred increased by 41% and 74% respectively). Considerable progress has also been made in the area of research. During the above-mentioned period, Québec universities increased their share of total Canadian university research from 27.6% to 30.8%. The goal of this policy is therefore to build on these achievements.

# Summary of the Results of the First Phase of the Consultation

During the first phase of the consultation, the opinions expressed by the participants did not reflect a perfectly uniform vision of what a university should be. Without in any way denying their duty to serve the community, some participants put forward a vision of the university that, to varying degrees, emphasizes the following principles: long-standing university tradition, the institutional autonomy that has always been part and parcel of this tradition and the freedom given to each member of the university community to teach and conduct research in the manner he or she believes will best serve the interests of the students and society at large. Other participants regard the university as one of the stakeholders in the vast area of accumulating and disseminating knowledge, in close collaboration with important partners that include the major laboratories and innovating firms. These relatively contrasting visions of the university will, to a certain extent, colour the opinions of the various participants in this debate.

Regardless of the different overall visions of the university, it is generally agreed, and with good reason, that the university plays a vital role as an agent of Québec's progress, in both the socio-economic arena and more strictly cultural fields. This function, which all universities must fulfill in serving their respective communities, is especially important in Québec because the Government has decided not to create its own network of major laboratories to meet the needs of the knowledge-based society, but to rely instead on the universities.

However, participants also acknowledged that much remained to be done, despite the vital importance of the role universities have played in the past and despite the progress made up to now. In particular, they stressed the following points: the need for a larger proportion of students at each level of university studies to earn diplomas, the importance of public support for university research, the pressing need to increase enrolments in certain disciplines where the demand for highly trained professionals greatly exceeds the supply and the community's interest to make it easier for young people to pursue graduate studies, especially in these high-demand disciplines.

It was also observed that precisely because the university holds a unique place in Québec society, it is essential, on the cusp of the third millennium, to put our heads together to consider what our expectations are. We must also ask how we can best ensure that the resources made available to the universities are used in the interest of all the citizens of Québec. No one has suggested that the Government intervene in the internal affairs of universities by imposing a bureaucratic system of control. However, some participants, both within and outside the university, did point out that the amount of money involved is so large and the stakes so high that the Government cannot afford to remain indifferent to the way these resources are used and to the benefits the public derives

from university activities. Various solutions were put forward, most notably the creation of an organization that would be independent both of the university and of the Ministère and that would periodically assess the results of university operations without infringing on the autonomy of the institution or the academic freedom of its professors.

The globalization of the economy is a fact of life and we see its effects with each passing week, especially its impact on company operations and the types of jobs offered. The new information and communications technologies (NICT) that contributed to the emergence of this trend continue to exert the same kind of intense pressure.

Québec universities are not impervious to this trend. They were already greatly involved in international communications networks even before the advent of these new technologies, and this trend has become more pronounced over the last few years. Even at the undergraduate level, many university programs are becoming more and more international in scope. Québec universities contribute to international exchanges involving professors and students, take part in several programs organized in conjunction with foreign universities and provide resources for numerous aid projects in developing countries. The extent of these developments was such that during the first series of meetings, some participants thought it necessary to emphasize that Québec universities were no longer competing among themselves, but were, in fact, competing with major foreign universities.

During the consultation meetings last spring, participants shared their points of view on several specific questions, agreeing in some cases and disagreeing significantly in others. To ensure that the current process is carried out smoothly, we have selected, from among all the issues discussed, those which seemed to be of greatest import and most likely to be reflected in a government policy statement. These questions have been grouped under a number of major themes and according to the table of contents in last spring's consultation paper entitled *Universities and the Future*. As a result, it seems logical to start with questions of a more general nature, namely those that, to a certain extent, will affect all the others. It was also decided that proponents of the different views would not be identified so that the discussion that will hopefully result from this review of the various opinions expressed could be conducted as dispassionately as possible.

## A- The Mission of Universities

In presenting their overall vision of what a university should be, all participants agreed, implicitly or explicitly, that a university's basic mission lies in generating and disseminating knowledge through research and teaching. The vast majority of participants also mentioned that universities should be involved in two other types of activity, namely critical analysis of all aspects of society and community service. Above and beyond these areas of agreement, a number of questions remained when it came to defining the specific conditions under which this

mission would be accomplished. Some were concerned about the fact that universities seemed to be establishing closer ties with business firms, especially by conducting contractual research and offering professional development courses. Others wondered how the university's mission might be affected by a number of recent, but well-established, trends already mentioned above, such as the globalization of the economy and the development of new information and communications technologies.

*In the light of what has been said up to now, to what extent should universities take labour market trends into account when deciding on the programs they will offer and their content? The current restructuring of industry is based on innovation. To what extent and at what rate should universities gear their programs to these new requirements? Do the current mechanisms for adjusting programs make it possible to deal with the situation?*

*Today's society is marked by increasing ties between universities, employers (internships), granting agencies (sources of funding) and business firms (research partnerships). These ties involve conflicting value systems. How can these numerous ties be reconciled with the need to preserve a university's autonomy and its ability to provide critical analysis of all aspects of society?*

Everyone agrees that the university is an essential public service. In forcefully emphasizing this point, some participants were concerned about the fact that through partnerships, business firms have been allowed to provide an increasing proportion of the funding given to universities. Some consider this to be a surreptitious way of gradually privatizing the institution. Should we work to establish general standards specifying how much of this type of private funding a university is permitted to receive?

The workforce must constantly update its knowledge and skills to keep up with the speed at which society, and especially the economy, is changing. University resources are often used for this type of professional development activity, and universities clearly have an essential role to play in this area. In fact, they have been steadfastly committed to occupational upgrading for many years. CEGEPs also provide a wide variety of retraining services. Under these circumstances, what should be the respective roles of CEGEPs and universities in this branch of higher education?

The presence of NICTs is pervasive in today's world. These new technologies already play an important part in university activities. Some fear that their presence might modify the university's fundamental mission. On the other hand, everyone considers that these technologies are especially powerful tools whose potential benefits cannot be disregarded. What role should NICTs play in Québec universities? Would you like the Government to take measures to promote greater use of these communication tools within the university community? If so, what measures should be taken?

Many emphasized the importance of academic freedom to ensure that universities can provide critical analysis of all aspects of society. What are the conditions essential to the preservation of this freedom? Each institution must strike a sensible balance between academic freedom, a code of ethics, work rules and requirements related to academic and administrative management. What relationships between these elements could be defined and clarified?

### B- Accessibility: Objectives To Be Confirmed

The participants made many comments and suggestions concerning access to university. Everyone agreed that it was an important issue in the current socio-economic context, particularly since the percentage of university graduates in Québec among the general population old enough to have attained such a level of instruction is lower than that in comparable societies, at least for those 25 and older. Although overall results in the under-25 age group are more encouraging, disparities among social groups persist. Adequate financial measures would greatly improve the situation. However, some participants cite more serious problems, rooted in both Québec family life and the education system itself and manifested particularly in the weakness of our scientific culture and a certain lack of interest in knowledge.

As a society, we believe that the university should be as open as possible to all Quebecers with the appropriate aptitudes who want to continue their studies. Access to university depends on many factors (financial factors, obviously, but also cultural, geographical and social factors).

As regards geographical distribution, it is agreed that university services should be available as close as possible to their clientele, which means that the regions of Québec should have institutions offering an adequate range of services. The Government has made a commitment to provide higher education wherever possible. However, in regions with small populations, it may be difficult to offer a broad range of university programs. What can be done to reconcile these demographic constraints with the objective of serving all regions equitably? Would greater cooperation between existing university-level institutions make it possible? What additional measures would help?

During the first phase of the consultation, the issue of tuition fees gave rise to a variety of opinions and led to numerous exchanges of ideas. Some participants, who consider that the number of enrolments is largely a function of the level of tuition fees, argued that fees should, at the very least, remain frozen, if not be reduced. They maintained this position even when it was suggested that reduced tuition fees might redistribute the collective wealth to the advantage of the more affluent members of society. Others suggested that if the loans and bursaries system were set up so that any student able and

willing to undertake higher education could enrol in university, tuition fees could be raised at least to the Canadian average without penalizing anyone. This would give universities access to new and extremely useful funds. In the short term, the Government is committed to leaving tuition fees at their present level. It is clear, however, that as time goes by and tuition rises elsewhere, Québec's position will become increasingly anomalous in North America. Should the Government take steps, at some point, to bring its situation in line with trends elsewhere?

Would it be possible to implement financial measures that would encourage students to opt for disciplines and levels of instruction leading to occupations that are in strong demand on the labour market, or considered likely to contribute to the development of a "knowledge-based society" in Québec? Should such measures target students, universities or both?

## C- Education and Student Support

Because the workforce must frequently upgrade its knowledge and skills or retrain, there is strong demand for continuing education programs. In addition, many adults who, for one reason or another, did not attend university immediately after secondary school or CEGEP, now wish to get a university education while continuing to earn their living.

Are "short programs" still a good way of meeting these needs? These programs target various categories of students, with different needs. Should these needs and categories be ranked by order of priority? In a continuing education system, what place would the university occupy, relative to the colleges and businesses?

The first consultation report underlined the importance the Government attributes to the quality of the education students receive in our universities. It follows that the teaching function of the university remains a top priority and that the students receive the best support and supervision possible. Several participants voiced concern in this connection, especially with regard to professors' workload.

*Considering that research and teaching comprise the essence of the university's mission, must each professor become a "microcosm" within the university with respect to these two functions, to use an expression coined by one of the participants? Most participants agreed that the professor's work has already been organized in a different way in most universities. However, if teaching is to receive all the attention it needs to train the highly specialized resources required by society and if, at the same time, students' needs are to be satisfied, could the universities agree on a number of rules concerning the respective place of teaching and research in the evaluation of a professor's career? Does the Government have a role to play in this procedure?*

*Various circumstances, such as preferences concerning class size, financial constraints, efforts to achieve flexibility and requirements for special expertise have led universities to rely in varying degree on lecturers. The first phase of the consultation established clearly that neither the professors, nor the lecturers, nor the students are entirely satisfied with the present situation. Given that in many cases the lecturers remain utterly indispensable to the operation of the university, some institutions have taken steps to integrate them better into academic life. What measures should universities take to ensure that students receive enough support and supervision when teaching is done by lecturers?*

#### D- Research and Partnerships

In order to respond to society's needs, especially its economic needs, universities have been investing more and more material and human resources in research and development activities. Until recently, these activities were funded by the major granting agencies, supplemented by the universities' own funds. Increasingly, however, university research is being carried out in cooperation with businesses, in the framework of partnerships whose number grows constantly, and which take up a considerable proportion of the professors' time.

*In these circumstances, what measures should the universities take to preserve the essential characteristics of university research, and in particular, the link that should exist between research and teaching? How much and under what conditions should universities become involved in industrial applications of the results of university research?*

## E- The “University System”: Consolidation of Services

Some participants were of the opinion that, for the sake of efficiency, Québec universities should function as a network. Others pointed out that the universities are already cooperating, with highly satisfactory results, although, in general, this cannot be said of relations between colleges and universities. Some participants suggested that greater coordination and cooperation among the universities would enable them to make better use of the resources placed at their disposition.

*In view of the different points of view expressed, to what extent would greater cooperation among universities improve their overall efficiency? If greater cooperation is necessary, what form should it take? And how should college-university cooperation be set up so that resources are used as efficiently as possible in higher education?*

*Some participants emphasized that there can be no question of imposing uniform standards on the various universities, which must be allowed to choose the disciplines and levels of instruction that correspond most closely to their respective missions. Each university must also be free to decide what services are best adapted to its own situation. This being said, and insofar as the basis for funding remains unchanged, should the Government, as a representative of the interests of society, be able to use at least part of any new resources to promote the development of disciplines or levels of instruction that it considers priorities for the future of Québec society?*

*To enable universities to fulfill their mission, society places major resources in their hands. It is understood by all concerned that the universities are accountable for the support they receive. There are already mechanisms designed to permit the Government to verify, at least in a general sense, that the funds have been used properly and that the results meet expectations. Are the existing mechanisms adequate for this purpose? If not, how can they be improved? Would more rigorous management procedures be sufficient, or are new structures needed?*

# Conclusion

The consultation paper entitled *Universities and the Future*, which was used as a reference during the first phase of the consultation, stated the objective of the consultation process: to identify, in cooperation with the universities, the major orientations of a government policy on higher education for Québec society on the eve of the 21st century. The document described the purpose of such a policy:

*“The purpose of the Government’s policy on Québec universities will be to determine what society currently expects of universities and to indicate the orientations that will inform any action taken by Government in this area over the next few years.”*

The second phase of consultation pursues the same objective, and this document is a follow-up to the document published almost a year ago. The first phase of the consultation made it possible to clear the way for more in-depth discussion with the various stakeholders. This document, which takes into account the exchanges of ideas that took place last spring, should allow the Government and the universities to identify still more clearly the stakes involved in the years to come and, at the same time, to promote the implementation of the measures necessary to help universities face the coming challenges. The services offered by universities to Québec society in the past few decades have been significant. Our society, whose situation in North America will always be difficult and threatened, will need its universities more than ever in the future to face the turbulent world in which we all must live.

Despite the considerable resources Québec universities receive from society, they, like other public services, have had to cope with severe budgetary restrictions. Such measures are never adopted lightly. In Québec, they could no longer be put off, and to wait any longer would only have made the ordeal more painful.

During the consultation last spring, some participants came close to suggesting that the problems currently experienced by universities were solely attributable to the budgetary constraints of the last decade. The relaxation of these constraints and the reestablishment of the previous status quo seemed to these participants to be necessary, and perhaps sufficient, conditions for enabling Québec universities to move confidently into the future.

The public expenditure compressions popularly known as “operation zero deficit” were undertaken with the sole aim of checking the growth of the public debt. These measures have imposed considerable effort and major sacrifices on all sectors of society. It is to be hoped that the economic and financial situation will improve in the near future enough to permit a progressive loosening of the restrictions that all public services have had to face during this deficit-cutting phase.

Meanwhile, Québec universities face many challenges over the next few years, and we must give very careful consideration, together, to the new orientations the university system will need in order to fulfill the role that society is entitled to expect from it. This will be the focus of the current round of consultations.