

# Consultations on higher education and educational success

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Announced at the height of last summer, Québec's ministerial consultations on education kicked off this fall and will be continuing on for the next few months. On the higher education front, the main proposals centre on new framework structures for the systems and institutions, notably with the creation of a council of universities and a council of colleges, and on amendments to the *Règlement sur le régime des études collégiales* (see page 12). For early childhood education and the primary and secondary levels, Minister Sébastien Proulx is criss-crossing Québec for regional and provincial consultations on the 50 some courses of action proposed in his document on educational success (see page 7).

The idea of setting up a council of universities has been the subject of talks and consultations in the past, most notably during the Summit on Higher Education organized by the Marois government in the aftermath of the student protests. At the time, the CSN and FNEEQ stressed the need for better coordination of the university sector in the face of, among other things, the proliferation—in some cases unbridled—of university campuses. For that reason, we proposed the creation of a council of universities consisting primarily of peer-appointed members of the different groups within the university community that would strive for parity between men and women and whose mission would be to build a common vision of the university network and improve coordination among the institutions while respecting their individual autonomy. We also demanded that this body not be permitted to implement any quality assurance mechanisms.

When the Minister of Higher Education announced this latest consultation would also focus on a proposed council of colleges, we saw it as an opportunity to advocate for the creation of an entity of similar composition and collegial functioning to ensure better coordination of continuing education and skills

development in the college sector. At present, continuing education is being delivered in a somewhat pell-mell manner, without any coordination or wider vision.

We have long been calling for a reflection on a vision of higher education that would rally the college and university communities and the Québec State and society around a common project. Without it, achieving any kind of consensus on the development of higher education and how it should be done is next to impossible. To us, the future of higher education must be firmly rooted in humanistic values and in the defence of education as both a fundamental right and a common good.

But the arguments being advanced by the Minister to justify the need for these new structures and their orientations go against our core views and beliefs about higher education. References to such things as the fast pace of change, the need to develop expertise and keep up with the times, the relevance and ongoing progress of the college and university systems, and the squaring with best practices are all examples of a utilitarian view of education that we simply do not share. We challenge the notion that universities and colleges must rapidly

adapt to the issues of the day: higher education cannot wax and wane according to the trends, passing fancies and short-term projections of the labour market.

We are therefore vehemently opposed to any initiative that seeks to reinforce the commodification, privatization and internationalization of education. This is a major political shift that must be publicly denounced. It goes without saying that we also object to any quality assurance, governance or accountability mechanism that finds its basis in the principles of new public management, and we will continue pushing for the abolishment of the *Commission d'évaluation de l'enseignement collégial*. The proposal to give the future Québec council of universities responsibility over accrediting non-Québec universities and attracting foreign students shows an inclination on the part of the government to open up and deal in the "education market," a prospect we find deeply disconcerting.

For many years, we have railed against the perverse effects of quality assurance mechanisms and, on those grounds, we oppose the creation of a joint commission on higher education that would serve to that

end. A clear distinction must be drawn between quality assurance and quality assessment. The work that teachers do each and every day is testimony of their commitment to providing quality educational services. That quality needs to be defined on the basis of such factors as the teacher-student relationship, transmission of knowledge, curriculum, learning conditions, teaching conditions, student support, accessibility (financial and geographic) and democracy. Assessing that quality, as we see it, must hinge on the traditional principles of self-management and collegiality; it must rely more heavily on qualitative than on quantitative analysis and reflect a humanistic perspective on education and the uniqueness of our institutions; it must be conducted with the utmost transparency within the institutions themselves and provide for follow-up on recommendations.

Instead of a joint commission, we propose that a standing liaison committee on higher education be put in place with the sole mission of ensuring coherence, complementarity and collaboration in higher education, while at the same time respecting the establishments' core missions, the autonomy of universities, the provincial nature of the college diploma and the college-university diploma sequence.

In short, while we are favourable, in principle, to the idea of establishing a council of universities and a council of colleges, we feel that both the models proposed for these and the creation of a joint commission to serve as an instrument for quality assurance and training modernization in higher education are unacceptable.

In the coming months, the Minister of Higher Education will have to prepare draft bills for the creation of these new institutions as well as a draft by-law to amend the RREC. This will give us the opportunity once again to make our positions and recommendations known during the consultation process on these legislative and regulatory changes. We will continue making representations on these issues in order to promote our vision of education and higher learning and, with the delegates at last October's special federal council meeting, have prepared a federation action plan. Throughout the winter and spring, we will have to keep up our efforts, with the help of all of our unions, to cleanse the temple of the merchants who would sacrifice the human right to education for short-sighted gains that could prove devastating to the citizens of tomorrow.

This past September, Sébastien Proulx, Minister of Education, Recreation and Sports, launched a wide-scale consultation in view of developing a policy on educational success at the primary and secondary levels. He invited education stakeholders and the general public to take part in the process.

To help guide the reflection, the Minister identified 50 specific courses of action to help promote educational success from early childhood to the end of secondary school. These ministerial proposals cover a wide range of subjects, such as, for example, support and funding for students with special needs, compulsory schooling, teacher training and continuing education for teachers, establishment of a provincial institute of excellence in education, evaluation of learning, creation of professional orders, development of 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies, integration of information technologies, and so on.

The CSN and its affiliated federations from the education sector (FNEEQ, FEESP, FSSS) drafted a brief that, submitted in mid-November, advocates the importance of, among other things:

- ensuring access to education and promoting the public school system;
- fostering equal opportunity and countering inequalities;
- offering services to students with special needs;
- valorizing teachers by recognizing their professional autonomy; etc.

We encourage you to visit our Website for more on these positions and orientations: <http://fneeq.qc.ca/fr/memoires-662/> ■