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Universities and Knowledge Diplomacy

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In 1988, the World Conference on Higher Education, assembled at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris declared:

“Education is a fundamental pillar of human rights, democracy, sustainable development and peace, and shall therefore become accessible to all.”

Beyond the traditional mission of education and research, the conference underlined the ethical responsibility of universities. It was an important message at a time when the already enormous gap between industrialized and developing countries—in the pursuit of research and access to higher learning—was becoming even wider.

Two decades later, the declaration has gained importance in our globalized world, which is struggling for economic and social justice, since the demand for higher education is growing. Indeed, universities enrollment is growing at a rate of 10 to 15 percent annually, especially in developing countries and emerging economies.

For universities, sharing knowledge, fostering international cooperation and offering access to new technologies allows these institutions to fully realize their mission.

International cooperation: important element of Canadian universities’ mission

International cooperation between universities is based on solidarity as well as the recognition that education is a basic element of national development and self-sustainable growth. Democratic knowledge cannot be transmitted only between affluent countries and must help social and economic development in the Southern hemisphere, particularly in the context of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals.

International cooperation can also be considered a toll towards the development of universities as they position themselves in an increasingly competitive market of higher education products and services. This new global challenge demands new partnerships between universities and international institutions, particularly in the field of research.

Cooperation is at the heart of an imperative strategy for all universities—to internationalize their training, teaching and research capabilities.

Why is it imperative?

Because universities have the duty to train citizens of the world who have frequented other cultures and mastered other languages, citizens sensitized to global challenges and ready to meet them today and tomorrow.

Because universities must stand for quality and excellence; our teaching must be of the highest caliber, our research must make a difference and this is achieved by measuring ourselves against and collaborating with the best minds from the four corners of the world.

Because it is important to share our best. Indeed, through learning exchanges and research, universities have always been international in nature.

International cooperation and Canadian universities

Developing and training the human resources of southern universities has become a key concern as Canada's institutions of higher education have emerged as international players. Since the 1970s, Canada's universities have engaged in over 2,600 international development projects and have trained more than 265,000 people in the developing world.

As the first Francophone research university of the world, the Université de Montréal has the responsibility to support its fellow universities in the southern hemisphere, something it has been doing for several decades.

Historically, the Université de Montréal's centres of excellence have allowed the university to implement medium-and-large-scale institutional projects internationally. These projects have always involved as many teachers and faculty members and students as possible and, in some cases, our International Health Unit or IHU.

Université de Montréal International Health Unit

Established in 1989, the IHU provides academic, professional and administrative coordination and support towards international health projects. The IHU helps students and professors move their projects forward.

The IHU encourages and nurtures scientific collaborations, in fundamental research and clinical work, by members of the Faculty of Medicine.

Collaboration is a core IHU value. Its sustained projects must meet the ethical criteria of university partners and international development efforts, while avoiding the transfer of Canadian models to other countries.

IHU partnerships are developed through dialogue with health institutions and other universities. Quality interventions are best fostered through continuous dialogue, which produces highly motivated and effective teams who then coordinate the planning and implementation of consistent joint activities.

The IHU allows the University of Montreal to contribute and adapt educational programs to international health realities. At the same time, global IHU projects enhance the University of Montreal's reputation and help bolster recruitment efforts among a large and growing international pool.

The IHU also helps the University of Montreal hone its research and teaching expertise. Foreign students, as part of their graduate studies, are often at the forefront of IHU activities and create long-lasting ties with institutions and individuals involved in health care around the world.

As a case in point, the Université de Montréal has entered into "solidarity contracts" with two southern universities: one in Burkina Faso and the other in Haiti.

One such project in sub-Saharan Africa, which is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, helps train health professionals to work in humanitarian camps.

The Université de Montréal has also established remote training programs, particularly in Morocco, where it offers a doctorate in nursing.

The growing complexity of partnerships

Our evolving relationships with partner institutions all over the globe reflect the increasingly multifaceted nature of international development. A good example is Canadian university involvement with institutions in China and India.

Historically, China has been the top country of Canadian university involvement in international development.

China and India are big advocates of cooperation, research collaboration, international student recruitment, two-way faculty mobility and the export of educational products and services. The establishment of joint degrees, student exchanges and strategic joint scientific pursuits between these countries and Canada are increasingly common.

Moreover, China and India are emerging economies and have become strategic research partners for Canada, as evidenced by Canada's signing of science and technology agreements with both countries.

Our universities must be ready to respond to the enormous growth of international needs in higher education. In the OECD countries, one in every two young people will enroll in a university program in his or her lifetime. Overall, the number of university enrollments is increasing by 10 to 15 percent annually, particularly in developing countries.

China is a striking example of a growing educational player, since its government will build no less than 100 new universities within the next 10 years.

What's more, China has identified its 49 best universities, at which the China Scholarship Council grants 6000 scholarships each year, to enable its best doctoral students from these 49 universities to continue their studies abroad. Aware of these developments, the Université de Montréal has concluded agreements with 10 of these universities to host nearly a 100 Chinese students on our campus.

This is an example of strategic positioning on the global playing field that all Quebec and Canadian universities should endeavor to multiply. The ultimate goal is to send more students abroad and welcome more foreign students here.

One of the leading rationales among universities for recruiting students from developing countries to our campuses is to ensure that the perspectives of developing nations are represented in Canada. Similarly, our universities should encourage more and more Canadian students to take part in exchange programs in developing countries. This will imbue young minds with a better understanding of the issues faced by developing countries.

As it happens, the UdeM and its affiliated business and engineering schools—HEC Montréal and the Ecole Polytechnique—account for nearly one quarter of all the foreign nationals studying in Quebec. Most international students are based in Montreal, which rivals Boston in per capita student enrollment.

Internationalization of research

Poverty, epidemics, immigration, technological gaps between countries are sweeping challenges that require international cooperation. That's why the UdeM has been at the forefront of international research for years and actively exchanges with prestigious centres or has created local research hubs with international perspectives and stature.

As an example, the Montreal satellite of the INSERM research unit in human immunology counts on researchers from our teaching hospital, the Centre Hospitalier de l'Université de Montréal. This is the very first North American branch of the prestigious Institut national de santé et de recherche médicale, INSERM, which is THE great national medical research institute in France.

Teams on both sides of the Atlantic are studying HIV-AIDS, cancer, hepatitis C and the development of vaccines by pooling cutting-edge technological platforms and researcher exchange programs. Having an INSERM satellite positions Montreal at the forefront of the search for an AIDS vaccine.

A second example is homegrown success story. IRIC (www.irc.ca), the Institute for Research in Immunology and Cancer, was established by the UdeM in 2002. The IRIC brings together a critical mass of the best international researchers under the same roof to elucidate the secrets of the immune system and the causes of cancer.

IRIC is at the heart of international collaborations for cancer treatment by stem cells, one of the most promising avenues in the fight against this plague.

Recently, IRIC took a major step forward by creating its subsidiary, IRICOR—an excellence centre in commercial development and valorization of research—another first in North America. In partnership with the pharmaceutical industry, this subsidiary will bring together 800 researchers, divided into 75 teams, to accelerate the marketing of discoveries emerging from university labs.

One last example, the Institute for European Studies, created jointly in 2000 by the UdeM and McGill. This Institute subsidizes North American researchers who take an outside look at Europe and it has built a solid international reputation.

Internationalization and the diplomacy of knowledge

Universities are increasingly playing a role as ambassadors. Our institutions are instruments in the flow of people, knowledge and rapports between nations.

By developing networks, new partnerships with sister institutions, ties with the business community and alliances with international players, modern universities are conducting their own diplomacy—a diplomacy that's complementary to that of states particularly on the cultural and scientific fronts.

Universities, in fact, are the bedrock of knowledge diplomacy.

Interuniversity network: IFPU

Knowledge diplomacy was a catalyst in the development of the International Forum of Public Universities (www.fiup.umontreal.ca/en).

Created in 2007 under the leadership of the UdeM, which has since housed the IFPU Secretariat, the organization was founded on the principles of diversity.

The IFPU brings together about 20 public universities from four continents, each operating in various languages and each hailing from developing and industrialized countries.

The IFPU helps advance the values and missions of public universities by fostering new and original collaborations in teaching, training and research and capitalizing in diversity. In this era of globalization, the IFPU will provide a new chapter in the development of a true community of public universities.

Networks with NGOs: ICOMOS

Apart from new university alliances, institutions of higher education depend on partnerships with major NGOs to solve global challenges. These links propel knowledge diplomacy in emerging global concerns such as the protection of cultural heritage.

Protection of architectural and landscape heritage has long been a priority of Quebecers. The UdeM, through its programs, chairs, research groups and ties with UNESCO, already covers all of the activities related to cultural heritage preservation. We are also the custodians of major institutional heritage sites that are icons of Greater Montréal.

Thanks to the UNESCO Chair in Landscape and Environmental Design, UdeM researchers have worked, in particular, to find solutions to the decline of the Marrakech Palm Grove, an environmental gem of Morocco.

And this fall, another group of students and researchers are travelling to Shanghai for a workshop to rethink Jinze Town, a suburb of the Chinese megalopolis.

In its latest initiative, we agreed with the International Council on Monuments and Sites, ICOMOS, on a memorandum of understanding for the development of teaching and research programs under the theme of “Heritage and Sustainable Development.”

ICOMOS, a world association of experts, is a privileged advisor of UNESCO in the methodology and technology of cultural heritage preservation and restoration.

Among the research with which the UdeM Faculty of Environmental Planning and Design will be associated are:

- the impact of climate change on heritage;
- the management of university and scientific heritage complexes and institutions;
- the development of international conventions and interventions frameworks on heritage matters.

This is a highly motivating project, in a field of planetary importance, which will enhance the UdeM’s influence abroad.

CÉRIUM

Creating university networks and developing closer ties with major institutions are top responsibilities in knowledge diplomacy. I would say that another responsibility is the popularization and dissemination of knowledge.

To deal with the challenges of globalization, it is essential to have a better understanding of its dynamics and the issues that arise from it: peace and security, governance, diversity.

This is the mission adopted by the Centre d’études et de recherches internationales de l’Université de Montréal, CÉRIUM (www.cerium.ca). With its 150 researchers grouped in 21 research units, CÉRIUM has developed high level specialized training in partnership with universities, NGOs, governments and institutions.

By its publications, lectures and seminars, and its French-language research network on peace operations, CÉRIUM contributes to the advancement of knowledge of major international issues and meets the growing needs for skilled professionals in the field of international studies.

CÉRIUM also propels knowledge diplomacy.

Conclusion

As I pointed out at the outset, the internationalization of universities helps universities advance their mission of training, teaching and research. For the UdeM, sharing resources in our interconnected world is the key hallmark of knowledge diplomacy.

Through international projects, we create mutually beneficial relationships among geographic neighbors near and far. We help countries abroad achieve prosperity and we help blaze new paths than enable Canadians to become citizens of the world.

Through knowledge diplomacy, universities empower others while helping affect change in our own communities.

Through knowledge diplomacy universities help societies everywhere to move forward.