

Almost half of university space is financed from operating budgets

Montréal, October 28, 2010 – In Quebec universities, funding to maintain buildings and grounds and for new acquisitions increasingly comes out of funds meant to support teaching and research. The gap between capital budget funds and physical needs has led university administrations to dip into operating budgets to finance new space and equipment. Between 1997 and 2007, the percentage of real property financing coming from operating funds jumped from 26% to 45%.

A new study by the Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU) reveals the gap between funding for buildings and grounds and the need for space caused by the growth of institutions and increasing student enrolments. The shortfall has disastrous consequences. The study examines all eighteen university establishments in Québec over a period of ten years, from 1997 to 2007. The report summary, entitled [Le fonds des immobilisations des universités. Une nouvelle cohérence à trouver entre vocations, budgets et réalités](#), edited by Elaine Hémond, Martin Maltais and Michel Umbriaco, lays out the magnitude of the problem.

It is clear that the funding allocated by the Ministry for Education, Leisure and Sport (MELS) for university space lags far behind inflation and the rise in student enrolments. The situation is critical, given that the existing facilities are aging and require serious maintenance, and that the need for more space is urgent, due to the upsurge in high-tech research and the growth in student numbers. In ten years, allocations for physical plant have decreased by 20.7%, while the annual real property acquisitions for all the universities went from \$333,000,000 to \$691,000,000, or, an increase of 108%. During the same period, student enrolments grew by 23.4%, while MELS was predicting a drop in student numbers. The gap between government predictions and reality is substantial and even more serious considering that the per-student contribution of MELS funding for buildings and grounds has been reduced. The study, with figures to support it, shows that the situation has become worse over time and risks becoming permanent.

Overall, transfers for buildings and land equal the total amount put into the general operating budget of Quebec universities by the government over the last few years. Thus, despite considerable government funding, with regard to university operating budgets, conditions for teaching and research have not improved. On the contrary, the rise in student numbers per course and the decrease in those taught by tenure-track professors, even at the graduate level, are clear signs of deterioration.

The study concludes with some urgent recommendations : 1) mandate an *États généraux* to draw up a master plan for Quebec university development; 2) safeguard university autonomy over their own operating budgets; 3) reexamine the competitive practices among university establishments.

This study is the second produced under the direction of the Comité sur le financement des universités de la FQPPU. An earlier report in 2008 showed how the rise in administrative costs has directly affected professors' salaries. For years now FQPPU has denounced such practices which undermine the academic, scientific and social goals of public institutions. Competing for student *clientèle*, expansion projects and targeted research, among others, encourage the commodification of knowledge and intensifies competition among institutions. More than ever, Québec needs deep reflection and a large-scale democratic debate, in the form of an *États généraux*, to plan the long-term future development of its university network.