

FRENCH AND ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES IN QUEBEC: IS IT REALLY A ZERO-SUM GAME?

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Of the 19 universities in Quebec, three provide instruction primarily in English: McGill and Concordia in Montreal, and Bishop's in Sherbrooke. Critics have long accused them of being “overfunded” and contributing to the decline of French. They claim that English-language universities receive a disproportionate share of infrastructure funding; attract more income through international students, who moreover are said to accelerate the “anglicization” of the province; and receive more funding per capita in relation to the size of Quebec’s English-speaking minority.¹ These criticisms, which are not always supported by evidence or communication of the broader context, have had an impact on policy. The present brief aims to unpack these claims, identify possible sources of confusion, and provide some clarity.

Background

The wave of social and political change in 1960s Quebec brought about a reorganization of the higher education system, with the creation of new French-language universities into what is known as the Université du Québec (UQ) network. English-language universities, as a result of political tensions and the perception that they had access to significant other funding sources, such as gifts, endowments and donations, received fewer public funds. During the 1960s, McGill’s professors were some of the lowest paid in the country, while facilities were falling into disrepair (McNally, 2013).

Since the 1970s, operational costs at all universities have risen, and funding has not kept up. This led to a landscape in which both French- and English-language universities grapple with chronic underfunding (Ratel & Verreault-Julien, 2006). Other Canadian provinces have shifted to an increased reliance on student fees, but attempts to raise fees in Quebec have often led to student protests, one of which gained international coverage in 2012 and came to

¹ Based on the mother tongue (first language learned at home in childhood and still understood) criterion.

be known as the “Maple Spring” (The Canadian Press, 2012). **Quebec’s total revenues from student fees remain among the lowest in the country** (Statistics Canada, 2022).

Alternatives to raising tuition fees, such as increased public funding, can offer more equitable solutions. Many European universities receive two thirds of their total funding from the general public purse (Lepori et al., 2019). However, **Quebec’s lower tuition fees are not offset by public investment**: in 2015, investment per student per year in Quebec was \$3,800 less than the Canadian average (Breton, 2015).

In short, students pay less, and the government also pays less. Recent estimates reveal that the Quebec university system is underfunded by 1.25 billion dollars compared with other provinces (Fortin, 2023).

Today’s Realities

Infrastructure Needs

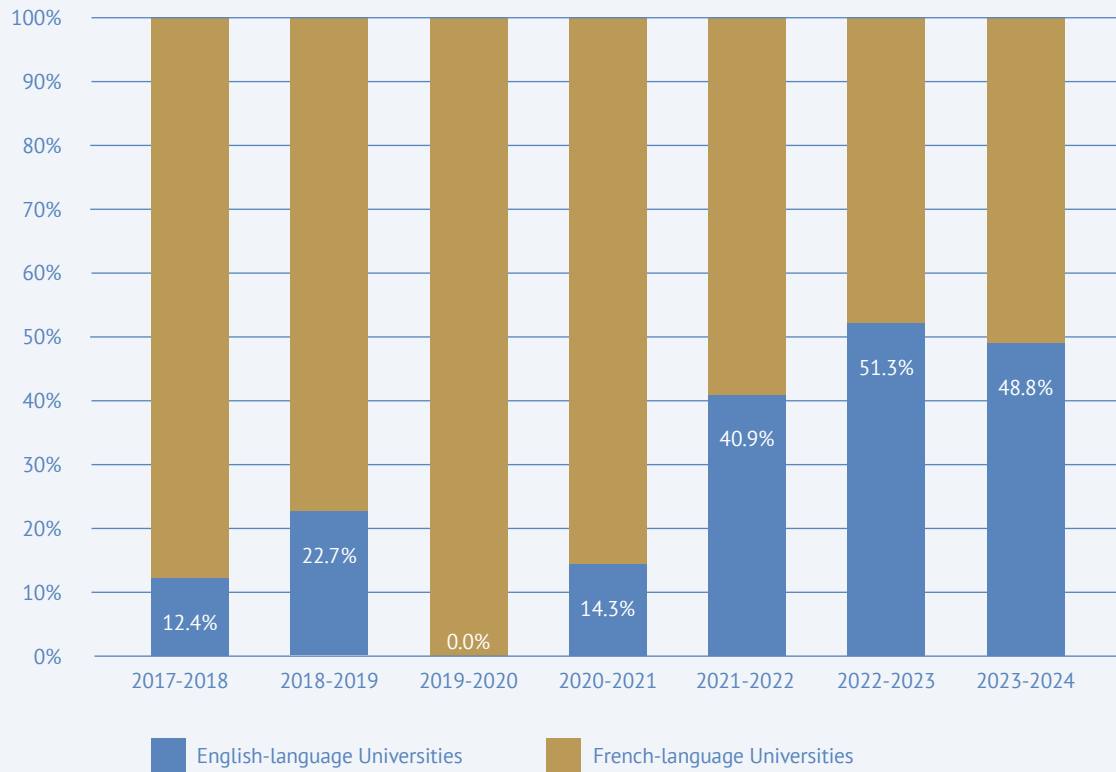
The latest provincial infrastructure plan showed projects at English-language universities receiving more than half of the total funds, with much of it earmarked for the redevelopment of McGill’s Royal Victoria Hospital (*Quebec Infrastructure Plan 2023-2033*). Critics claimed that the French-language universities were left with a “meagre 40 percent,” which amounted to the province “funding the anglicization of Quebec” (Bergeron, 2023).

The reality is that the **English-language campuses are in greater need of repair than most of their French-language counterparts**. A 2016 report by the Quebec government found that 73 percent of McGill University’s buildings are in poor, or very poor, shape, and gave a failing grade of E, which is the worst possible. The study also named Concordia and Université de Montréal as needing significant repair and/or renovation. Off-island, Bishop’s University earned D and E scores, with 60 percent of its buildings deemed in need of renovations. That same report rated the Université du Québec network as appearing to be in overall good condition, with most of its buildings earning passing grades (Gentile, 2016).

The renovation plan for McGill’s Royal Victoria Hospital is a particular case that needs to be looked at from a broader perspective. This non-recurring investment will restore major heritage buildings, projects of a type that often bear a hefty price tag. The plan also outlines renovations that offer benefits to all Montrealers, including the French-speaking majority, with, among others, new public green spaces on Mont Royal to replace unused parking lots (Québec, 2023).

Examining the infrastructure budgets published by the government of Quebec since 2017 further demystifies the issue. McGill is undergoing long-overdue renovations. From 2017 to 2020, only one English-language university, Concordia, received funding for major infrastructure projects. Past infrastructure reports show that **the recent increase in funding to English-language universities follows years of lower funding (Fig. 1)**.

Figure 1:
Planned annual university infrastructure investments, 2017-2023



Source:
 Québec Infrastructure Plan, Expenditure Budget, published annually from 2017 to 2023

International Students

Recent policy adjustments incentivized universities to bring in international students. Before 2018, tuition fees from such students were absorbed by the province and redistributed among the entire university network. Starting in 2018, Québec allowed universities to set their own price for foreign students,² granted them the right to keep the funds, and cancelled standardized subsidies for these students (Venne, 2018). In 2023, the government announced that it will repeal this measure and return to greater government control of international tuition fees (Riga, 2023a).

Did the 2018 measure lead to the “overfunding” of English-language universities? Since English is the global lingua franca, these universities attract more international students and thus benefit more from this adjustment.

² With the exception of tuition for all French and Belgian students, and some students from 35+ other countries, due to standing bilateral agreements. See here (Cabrera, 2024): <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/quebec-tuition-fee-exemptions-international-1.7100761>.

However, the government funds saved by the cancellation of foreign student subsidies were redirected to francophone universities to help bolster their international recruitment (Venne, 2018). The proportion of international students at French-language universities is rising (Colpron, 2023), but whether these measures ensure equity with what English-language universities receive from attracting more non-Canadian students needs further investigation. Nevertheless, **it is incorrect to qualify this measure as “overfunding” by the province, since the extra revenue to English-language universities comes from international students themselves**: they are proportionally more numerous in English-language universities and pay higher tuition. **The province does not provide more funding per student to English-language universities** (Fortin, 2023). Nevertheless, some decried the move as incentivizing the hiking of fees for international students, making Quebec universities more expensive and thus less accessible to them (Dickinson, 2020).

The international student population is also a concern for those who worry about the “anglicization of Montreal.” Critics point to research showing that the majority of Quebec’s international students enrolled in English-language universities are more likely to contribute to the English-speaking workforce if they stay. However, this same study also found that three out of four Francophones working primarily in English had received their latest degree from a French-language institution (Lemyre, 2022). More research is needed to gauge how well international graduates know and use French outside work, and the long-term intergenerational impact due to provincial language laws requiring most to send their children to French-language schools. In short, **the impact of language of instruction and work on the vitality of French is not as direct as some assume.**

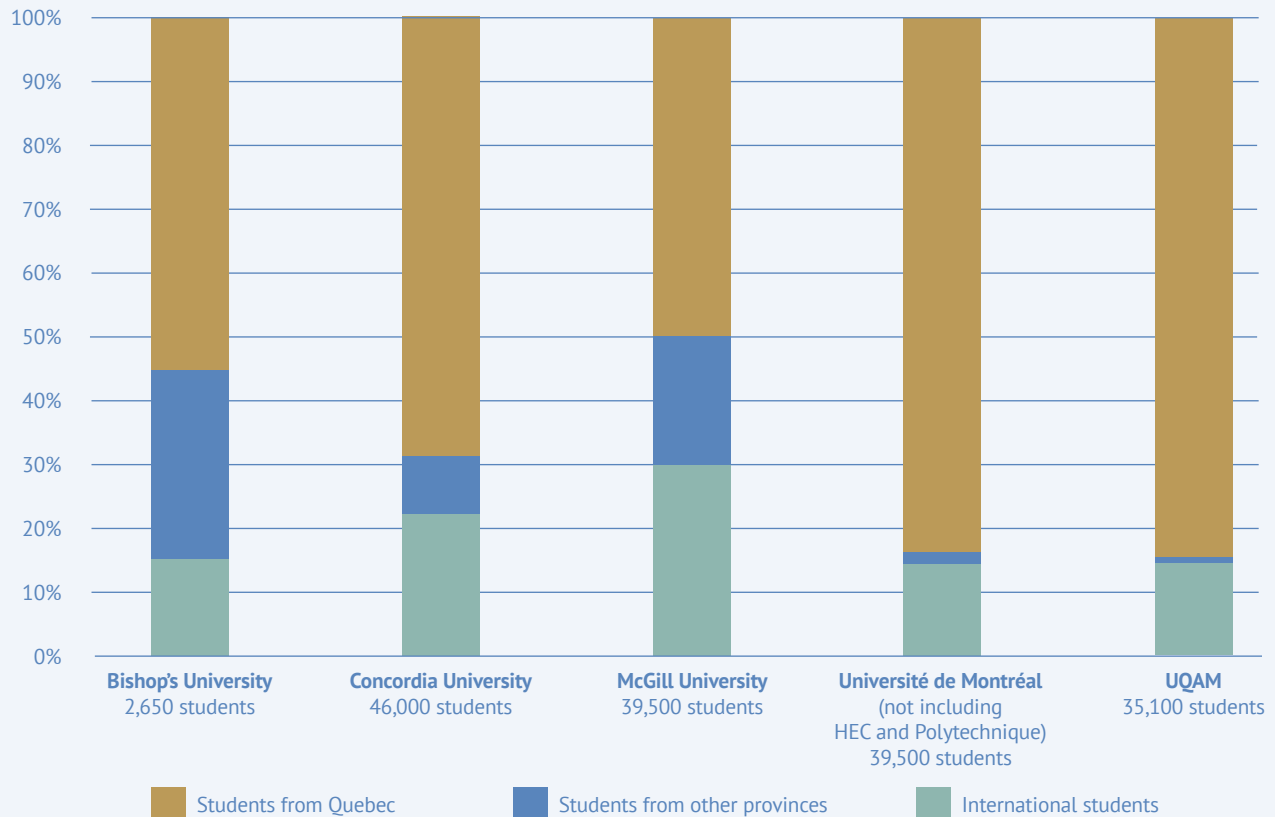
Funding in relation to the size of the English-speaking minority

Another argument supporting the characterization of English-language universities as overfunded is the assertion that they receive more money relative to the demographic weight of Quebec’s English-speaking population.³ Columnist and essayist Frédéric Lacroix claims their revenue is “3.7 times greater than the demographic weight of the province’s anglophone community” (Canada, 2021; Lacroix, 2020). It’s important to note that this claim points to total revenue and not provincial funding per student, which is the same for universities operating in English and French.

Should a university’s purse correspond to the linguistic ratio of the provincial population? This use of “equity ratios” has been criticized (Corbeil, 2021). For one, it assumes that McGill, Concordia, and Bishop’s exclusively serve the English-speaking population of Quebec. On the contrary, these universities operate in a network serving the broader Quebec population. A significant portion of professors and staff at English-language universities are Francophone, and research networks are shared among the entire university network, regardless of mother tongue. English-language universities are also competing within a larger global market (Usher, 2023). McGill and Concordia have much higher proportions of international students than Francophone universities in Montreal (*Fig. 2*). They position Quebec as a global player in the same way that universities across the world offering instruction in English do not strictly serve English speakers in their countries: Maastricht University in the Netherlands and Hong Kong University are but two examples.

³ According to the 2021 Census, English speakers represent slightly more than 8% of the Quebec population based on the mother tongue criterion typically used by those promoting this argument. There are other ways to measure the size of the English-speaking population: close to 15% of the population of Quebec, and close to 30% on the island of Montreal, had English as their first official language spoken.

Figure 2:
Provenance of Students at Quebec Universities



Source: Riga, 2023b

Out-of-province students

Pointing to a perception of a decline in the use of French on the streets of Montreal and through a selective use of census indicators, the government announced a plan in October 2023 to nearly double tuition fees starting in Fall 2024 for out-of-province students attending Quebec English-language universities and recoup these funds for redistribution to French-language universities. The policy, in addition to reversing the alleged anglicizing of Montreal, was justified by leaders as rectifying what they claim to be a burdensome subsidization of out-of-province Anglophones who come to Quebec to study and leave after graduation. Neither claim was supported with data at the press announcement (Riga, 2023a).

This policy announcement has been criticized from both economic and ideological standpoints. Quebec's fees for out-of-province students currently reflect the Canadian average, so some fear any hikes would price the universities out of the market. Moreover, from an economic standpoint, one assessment of the fee charts found that a similar number of Quebec students profit from Ontario's in-province tuition, so **subsidies borne by Quebec for out-of-province students are offset by costs borne by Ontario for Quebec students** (Usher, 2023). Ideological arguments underline what appears to be a conflation of two different problems: the chronic underfunding of the university system and the future of French in Quebec (Berrada, 2024).

The main takeaway from these criticisms is that the French language won't be protected by raising tuition fees for out-of-province students, and that the issue likely requires measures around immigration policy rather than university policy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Should higher education policy lock Quebec's English- and French-language universities in a zero-sum game? Or could it promote and protect the French language through effective francization measures in partnership with English-language institutions, while also supporting diverse and global student populations?

For the latter to happen, **English-language universities need to be recognized as an asset to Quebec**. Evidence would be reviewed to defuse claims of their being overfunded or detrimental to the French language (for the latter, see Corbeil, 2021). Infrastructure spending allotted to them would be analyzed with a broad view of Quebec society and of change over time, to catch sight of collective benefits. The English universities would be valued as points of entry to Quebec's unique culture, where students can easily find resources to support integration, such as French language courses.

Moreover, rather than being only recognized as linguistic community institutions representing and serving their respective, separate populations, universities both English and French would also be seen as parts of one Quebec system contributing to Quebec society and the economy as a whole. This system would be valued as greatly beneficial to both the province and a pan-Canadian, pan-global student population, and would receive more government funding.

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