

Opinion Leader: Dr Yves Gingras

Canada Research Chairs : More money but less Autonomy for Canadian Universities

By Dr Yves Gingras

The division of powers between federal and provincial governments, as expressed in the Constitution, leaves education to the provinces. In contrast, scientific research is a joint jurisdiction. It is thus through research that the federal government can intervene in university affairs. Usually federal money to universities has been channeled through the three granting councils. Since the mid-1990s however, the federal strategy has been to intervene more directly to influence the direction of scientific research in Canadian universities.

They have established new agencies and foundations to channel new funds, leaving the research councils — arm's length and autonomous agencies — with only slowly increasing budgets. Thus was created the Canadian Foundation for Innovation and Genome Canada (not to mention the Millennium Fund). Another step in the same direction was taken with the creation in 2000 of the Canada Research Chairs program. In addition to giving a greater visibility to federal money, these structures provide greater federal control over priorities. For the first time in their history, Canadian universities receiving Chairs had first to submit a "strategic research plan" to serve as a basis for evaluating their proposals.

Though the proposals are evaluated according to the usual peer review criteria and are thus independent of any political or governmental pressures, it remains that there is a new element of control over universities which now have to better define their priorities. This may align their priorities according to the last dominant discourse, namely the "knowledge economy".

A first indication that the federal government sees "knowledge economy" essentially based on science and technology is reflected in the distribution of the 2000 chairs: 20% for the social sciences and humanities, 35% for the health sciences and 45% for sciences and engineering. This distribution was essentially based on the actual distribution of funds.

But the distribution of full-time professors is very different. About 54% are in social sciences and humanities, 30% in sciences and engineering and 10% in health sciences (1998-1999 data). So it is clear that the general ideological context gives priority to the sciences even though it could be argued that most of the problems of our knowledge society are in fact social and cultural.

Results

Two years after the program's creation, about one third of the chairs have been allocated (as of June 2002) and we can now see if the initial results are in step with its provisions and objectives.

The first striking result is that even though the government has insisted that the program would contribute to stop a supposed "brain drain", 75% of the chairs have been given to those already inside the universities. Only 15% of the Chairs have attracted foreign researchers. Second, small universities feared that the program would deprive them of their best researchers who would be dragged by the big universities who have the greatest number of chairs. Here again the prediction did not materialize as only 9% of the Chairs involved a move from one Canadian university to another.

This does not mean that these movements did not have a negative impact on the losing university.

The small attraction of the program (up to now) to foreign researchers can be explained by two factors. First, it is natural that universities began by offering chairs to their best professors in order not to lose them. It is to be expected that the proportion of external chairs will rise in the coming years. Second, a senior chair is only 200,000 Canadian dollars, which isn't much of an attraction in the sciences given the high costs of research infrastructure. Despite some rhetoric to that effect, the program cannot seriously compete with American offers. Generally, universities have taken the program seriously and sent their best choice for the chairs since 90% have been accepted by the peer-review committees.

Absent women

The most surprising result overall — scandalous to many — has been the gender distribution of the Chairs. Only 15% have been allocated to women whereas women represent 27% of academia. And even though many denounced the tendency after each evaluation, the results have not changed. As expected, the sciences and engineering fields are the worst with only 10% of women having Chairs, 16% in health sciences and 24% in social sciences and humanities. In these fields, women represent respectively 13%, 33% and 32% of professors, so there seems to be a clear bias. There are more junior chairs attributed to women (21%) than senior ones (10%) since they represent 15% of full professors and 42% of assistant professorships. But even at this level, there is a visible under representation.

Time for adjustments.

All these data point to a real problem. Faced with these numbers, many are now asking for a change in the process of nomination internal to universities where these choices are made. It could even be necessary to impose quotas to make sure Canadian universities take the problem seriously enough and implement concrete measures so that women get a fair number of Chairs.

In summary, in the light of these data on the Chairs program — now in mid-course — pressure will mount on universities so that they better attract outside researchers and women. Likewise, the disproportion between the number of chairs in social sciences and humanities and their much larger presence on campus also call for a solution in the form of the creation of new Chairs over and above the actual 2000.

Given the large number of internal chairs, it will have to be ensured that these promotions have been compensated by the recruitment of junior scholars as replacements. Otherwise, the objective of upgrading the research capacity of Canadian universities will not really have been met, leaving one to wonder if part of the federal money has not been sent to the consolidated fund of the institutions.

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* The author wishes to thank Denis Croux and René Durocher of the Canada Research Chair program for providing statistical data.

