Charter universities, public universities and the quest for excellence

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In recent articles published in The Gazette of April 18th and May 14th, columnist Henry Aubin claims that there is a schism opposing two fundamental cultures related to the existence of two kinds of universities in Quebec: the so-called “charter universities” embracing the pursuit of excellence, and the so-called “public universities” with no such aspirations. The problem with that kind of interpretation is that it ignores the fact that the excellence of an institution has nothing to do with its status (charter or public), since all researchers from all universities are subject to the same standards of peer evaluation for their grant applications and publications, just as the same kind of standards apply to the evaluation of the quality of the programs they offer.

Moreover, such a discourse is totally silent on an important dimension of excellence that we do not talk about enough and which I would like to bring to the attention of The Gazette readers: today, the excellence of universities depends increasingly on their capacity to establish collaborations with others, so as to create networks that exploit the best each has to offer in order to attain the greatest standards of quality in research and teaching. In this context, what does it mean to differentiate universities on the basis of their status when they share the same research or academic program? For example, at UQAM, the GÉOTOP (Centre for Research in Geochemistry and Geodynamics) comprises some forty researchers from UQAM, McGill University, Concordia University, the National Institute of Scientific Research, Université du Québec à Rimouski, Université Laval, Université du Québec à Chicoutimi and Université de Montréal. The Centre for Forest Research (CEF), created by a group from UQAM and a group from Université Laval, brings together researchers from eleven institutions, including McGill, Concordia, Université de Montréal and Sherbrooke. These are just two examples of what has become a fundamental reality of university research, and many researchers from UQAM also find themselves on teams attached to other universities.

If this is true for research, the same goes for academic programs: UQAM offers or is associated with several programs in collaboration with universities in the Université du Québec network, as well as with several charter universities in Quebec. Consider the Ph.D. in Administration with
McGill, Concordia and HEC Montréal; the Ph.D. in Communication with Concordia and Université de Montréal; and the Ph.D. in Art History with Université Laval, Université de Montréal and Concordia, to name just a few.

As demonstrated by these few examples, university excellence is unrelated to whether an institution is “charter” or “public”. Our development and our ability to shine on the world stage stem from collaboration between all institutions in reinforcing the collective strength of researchers and students in Montreal and across Quebec.