

## **UNIVERSITY EDUCATION: QUEBEC HAS BEEN LAGGING BEHIND FOR THE PAST 50 YEARS**

**Montreal, November 14, 2012** – Although Quebec has come a long way in secondary schooling, the province has lagged for the past 50 years in terms of university education. This gap is not only with other Canadians, but also in comparison with many OECD countries that have seen consistent growth in their productivity and standard of living over the past three decades. This finding, spelled out in *Productivity and Prosperity in Quebec – 2012 Overview*, is worrisome to say the least.

“This is a definite handicap for Quebec, because education is a powerful economic lever,” explains Robert Gagné, Director of the HEC Montréal Centre for Productivity and Prosperity (CPP). “More than ever, we are living in a “knowledge society”, i.e. one whose development is based on the knowledge and know-how of its labour force. University education encourages innovation and also contributes to productivity growth. That’s why we consider it so essential for government decision-makers to take the appropriate steps to encourage young Quebecers to pursue higher education.”

### **A variable-geometry lag in education**

More specifically, the study shows that in the early 1960s the proportion of the population ages 15 and up with a high school diploma was lower in Quebec (18.2%) than in Ontario (21.5%) or British Columbia (30.1%), while the proportion of people with a university degree was more comparable: Quebec 2.9%, Ontario 3.4% and British Columbia 3.2%.

Nearly 50 years later, it is clear that the modernization of Quebec’s education system did produce results. By 2006, Quebec had almost closed the secondary education gap. Close to three-quarters (74.9%) of Quebecers ages 15 and up had a high school diploma, as opposed to 80.1% in British Columbia and 77.8% in Ontario. On the other hand, the gap had widened when it came to university education, with only 16.5% of Quebecers ages 15 and up holding a university degree, as compared with 20.5% in Ontario and 19.3% in British Columbia.

When we broaden the comparison to the international scene, the conclusions continue to be disturbing: not only is Quebec underperforming the rest of Canada (and Canada is itself far from exceptional in the global context), but generally speaking, Quebec also comes in far behind many OECD countries. For instance, the proportion of men in the United States, the Netherlands and Japan with a university degree is up to 50% higher than in Quebec. The picture is not much brighter for women: in 2009, only Japan, France, Spain and Germany had lower levels of university education for women than Quebec.

### **Men in the classroom**

What explains this discrepancy? “The deterioration in Quebec’s relative situation in terms of university education is essentially due to the slower gains made by men,” says Gagné. “Is this the result of the high drop-out rate for boys? We don’t know. One thing is sure; women have really caught up in education. In 35 years, the proportion of women ages 15 and up with a university

degree increased more than fivefold: by 2006, 16.4% of Quebec women ages 15 and up had a university degree, essentially identical to the percentage of university-educated men (16.6%).”

This does not mean, however, that the rate of university education among Quebec women is now satisfactory, given that the gap in comparison with women in Ontario held steady from 1971 to 2006. Indeed, Quebec women started from far behind and they continue to trail.

Like many other societies, Quebec has made considerable progress in terms of education over the past 50 years. Yet despite a university system among the most financially accessible in the western world, it is having trouble boosting university enrolment. “There are universities in many Quebec regions, and Quebec students enjoy both relatively low tuition and fairly generous student aid. The causes of Quebecers’ lack of interest in university studies must certainly lie elsewhere, and it is urgent that we identify them,” maintains Gagné.

The CPP’s *2012 Overview* is not limited to education issues, but also paints a detailed picture of Quebec’s economic performance and contrasts it with that of some twenty industrialized countries, including Canada and the United States. For the first time, this year’s report also offers a detailed analysis of certain factors with a decisive influence on Quebec’s productivity (health, transportation, competitiveness of goods markets, tax policy and assistance for business) and suggests some ideas for improving the situation.

**For more information:**

- See page 26 of [Productivity and Prosperity in Quebec – 2012 Overview](#)
- Téléchargez le communiqué [en français](#).

**About the Centre for Productivity and Prosperity**

The HEC Montréal Centre for Productivity and Prosperity, created in 2009, has a twofold mission. First of all, it is devoted to research on productivity and prosperity, mainly in Quebec and in Canada as a whole. The Centre then shares its research findings, making them widely accessible and, in the end, educating people about productivity and prosperity. For more information on the Centre, visit [www.hec.ca/cpp](http://www.hec.ca/cpp).

- 30 -

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