

The Influence of the State on the Internal Governance of Universities: A Comparative Study of Quebec (Canada) and Western Systems

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Abstract : The question of internal governance of universities is a political and scientific debate in the province of Quebec (Canada). Governments have called or set up inquiries on the subject on three separate occasions since the complete overhaul of the educational system in the 1960s: the Parent Commission (1967), the Angers Commission (1979) and the Summit on Higher Education (2013). All three produced reports that highlight the constant tug-of-war for authority and legitimacy within universities. Past and current research that cover Quebec universities have studied several aspects regarding internal governance: the structure as a whole or only some parts of it, the importance of certain key aspects such as collegiality or strategic planning, or of stakeholders, such as students or administrators. External governance has also been studied, though, as with internal governance, research so far as only covered well delineated topics like financing policies or overall impacts from wider societal changes such as New Public Management. The latter, NPM, is often brought up as a factor that influenced overall State policies like “steering-at-a-distance” or internal shifts towards “managerialism”. Yet, to the authors’ knowledge, there is not study that specifically maps how the Quebec State formally influences internal governance. In addition, most studies about the Quebec university system are not comparative in nature. This paper presents a portion of the results produced by a 2022- 2023 study that aims at filling these last two gaps in knowledge. Building on existing governmental, institutional, and scientific papers, we documented the legal and regulatory framework of the Quebec university system and of twenty-one other university systems in North America and Europe (2 in Canada, 2 in the USA, 16 in Europe, with the addition of the European Union as a distinct case). This allowed us to map the presence (or absence) of mandatory structures of governance enforced by States, as well as their composition. Then, using Clark’s “triangle of coordination”, we analyzed each system to assess the relative influences of the market, the State and the collegium upon the governance model put in place. Finally, we compared all 21 non-Quebec systems to characterize the province’s policies in an internal perspective. Preliminary findings are twofold. First, when all systems are placed on a continuum ranging from “no State interference in internal governance” to “State-run universities”, Quebec comes in the middle of the pack, albeit with a slight lean towards institutional freedom. When it comes to overall governance (like Boards and Senates), the dual nature of the Quebec system, with its public university and its coopted yet historically private (or ecclesiastic) institutions, in fact mimics the duality of all university systems. Second, however, is the sheer abundance of legal and regulatory mandates from the State that, while not expressly addressing internal governance, seems to require de facto modification of internal governance structure and dynamics to ensure institutional conformity with said mandates. This study is only a fraction of the research that is needed to better understand State-universities interactions regarding governance. We hope it will set the stage for future studies.

Keywords : internal governance, legislation, Quebec, universities

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