Revolutionising how researchers connect with the public

Dr Catherine Mounier, Marcel Simoneau and Dr Caroline Roger discuss knowledge mobilisation and Université du Québec à Montréal’s work to engage community members and non-academic partners with both its research and researchers.

Can you introduce Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and your role as Vice President of Research and Creation?

CM: UQAM – an urban, comprehensive, public French-language university – was founded with the mandate of making higher education more accessible and democratic. Through knowledge mobilisation, it is exploring new fields of innovation and developing close partnerships with the actors of the society. UQAM is dedicated to developing the full potential of individuals and society.

I joined UQAM in 2003 and have held many roles in the University. I have been Professor in the Department of Biological Sciences since 2003, and I was Deputy Director of the Department from 2007-12 and its Director from 2012-15. This June, I assumed the role of Vice President of Research and Creation, where my role is to accompany professors in the expansion of their projects into partnerships and to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to our wide community of services that connects academic research with research and researchers with people and organisations to work together throughout the execution of a project and consequently induce a soft and natural knowledge transfer. Such an approach has many benefits; for example, it lessens the resistance to change that is often observed in different organisations and/or when new technologies are launched into a market.

What is RIR?

ALL: RIR is Canada’s network of 11 universities committed to maximising the impact of academic research for the social, economic, environmental and health benefits of Canadians using knowledge mobilisation. UQAM joined the network in 2010. The network believes that academic research can significantly contribute to society, in particular if academic expertise is partnered with expertise from community, industry and government organisations.

What benefits does knowledge mobilisation offer researchers and the public?

ALL: The hope behind knowledge mobilisation is that it will inspire and enable researchers, people and organisations to work together following the execution of a project and consequently induce a soft and natural knowledge transfer. Such an approach has many benefits; for example, it lessens the resistance to change that is often observed in different organisations and/or when new technologies are launched into a market.

The concept of knowledge mobilisation is starting to catch fire across Canada, especially following the country’s recently adopted science, technology and innovation (ST&I) strategy, which is pushing universities to adopt a fresh approach to complement technology transfer and industry liaison. What are your thoughts on this movement?

ALL: We are happy to say that we adopted the approach of knowledge mobilisation way before this new policy! UQAM has always been sensitive to marginalised and disadvantaged populations. The establishment of our community-based research unit – which began in the 1970s – and how it has grown are good examples of UQAM being a leader in this field. We are just happy that this approach is finally being recognised more widely.

Do you have any other examples of accomplishments you can share?

ALL: There are so many, it is hard to list them all. Some that we are particularly fond of that were developed over recent years by our two knowledge brokers include:

- Workshops for professors on how to build knowledge mobilisation plans into grant applications and on how to approach potential collaborators
- Development of clear language research summaries, called ‘Fiches Focus’. These summaries provide greater access to research findings and tools that can be useful for potential users
- Mapped out descriptions of professors’ areas of expertise, which were then addressed to potential partners
- International collaborations to improve innovation transfer and promote expertise in a specific sector. For example, with colleagues from Belgium, we have created map tools related to its ageing population.

Instead of trying to push a technology on society after a project is finished, our activities at UQAM broadly aim to use knowledge mobilisation to facilitate the transfer of knowledge to our wide range of partners in a more natural, harmonious and inclusive way. We believe that our partners’ experience should be included at the very front end of our activities and that through knowledge mobilisation we can include them in the process of creation.
THERE HAS LONG been a discord between academic researchers and those downstream of their work. Often, researchers lament that the general public just does not understand what they are doing, and reciprocally, the general public often accuses researchers of locking themselves away in ivory towers. Indeed, building a successful, long-lasting and fruitful relationship between those on the inside of a university’s walls with those on the outside can seem like a daunting task.

Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) is breaking down this divide by acting as a bridge between the two parties and by creating a framework through which potential users of academics’ work and the academics themselves can join forces. They are achieving this feat using the concept of knowledge mobilisation.

KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION
The principle behind knowledge mobilisation is to maximise the contribution of social, economic, art, health and environmental research to society and to create an understanding between academic researchers and those downstream of their research’s applications – be those community members, industry members, governmental officials or people somewhere in between. Proponents of knowledge mobilisation insist that in order for research to have true impact on society, there must be a focus on communication, relationship building and shared learning experiences as early on in research as possible so that both the end users and the researchers themselves can influence one another’s ideas. They believe that it is only by approaching information sharing in this way that there will be true uptake of new ideas, technologies, innovations and inventions.

Knowledge mobilisation has been a major thread weaved into the work of the UQAM since its inception. And, in recent years, mobilisation has become more central to the University’s activities, especially in terms of developing ways to support knowledge mobilisation with professors, and since the University joined ResearchImpact-RéseauimpactRecherche (RIR) – a pan-Canadian network committed to knowledge mobilisation – in 2010.

SHARING KNOWLEDGE
The idea to join RIR and the desire to develop new ways of supporting researchers in their knowledge mobilisation activities initially came from Dominique Robitaille, who was at the time Director of Research and Creation Services (SRC), and Dr Caroline Roger, Director of Partnerships and Innovation Support Services (SePSI). “Our two services developed the knowledge mobilisation unit, which includes two knowledge brokers with the mandate of realising our annual knowledge mobilisation plan,” Rogers shares.

In addition to SRC and SePSI, there is a third unit deeply involved in knowledge mobilisation activities. Community Services (SAC) focuses on engaging with community groups and end users of products. This work allows the Director of SAC, Marcel Simoneau, and his team to understand the needs of the communities relevant to various branches of the University. “SAC exists at the intersection between community and the University,” Simoneau explains. “Its mandates are to act as an interface agent and to promote and coordinate training and research activities to be carried out by faculty members in collaboration with community partners.”

The Université du Québec à Montréal is working to improve the impact of its research, both scientific and social, on those it was designed to help through closer engagement between researchers and end users.

Getting knowledge on the move

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According to Simoneau, UQAM has developed institutional approaches intended to support faculty members implicated in partnership projects with NGOs since its foundation in 1969. He explains these approaches more thoroughly: “We aim to recognise engagement as part of the first two missions of our University: research and teaching. These approaches were developed on the premise that such engagement would contribute to a better knowledge-based society and to improvements in teaching and research activities related with UQAM’s social involvement in the community”.

As part of this remit, SAC is often asked to hold workshops and provide assistance to University members in order to help them construct a knowledge mobilisation plan into their research projects. “Each year, 900 hours are provided to professors by the University, in coordination with SAC, to enable them to work on projects in partnership with NGOs, women’s groups and unions, which means there is plenty of experience and knowledge transfer available to those for whom the process is unfamiliar,” Simoneau says.

Though SePSI and SRC have similar goals to SAC, the way they approach knowledge mobilisation is different. Through SePSI, Roger and the team at UQAM provide several core services directly to researchers with an aim of building ties with industry. For example, researchers from the University may choose to work with SePSI if they want to build a relationship with an industry member, a governmental organisation or an NGO, or if they have questions related to valorisation of an innovation (including technology transfer). “SePSI supports a wide variety of transfer activities, from communication to questions about intellectual property to organisational questions, to name a few,” Roger shares. “We have developed tools, and we offer assistance to help our researchers plan their transfer activities – or aspects related to the governance of their projects – no matter what field or discipline the activity is related to.”

SePSI works closely with SRC. Together, they offer an integrated approach to all professors who are seeking funding for their research. For example, SePSI and SRC have created several research summaries for academics that explain their work in a clear language accessible to all. Concurrently, members of the units are mapping research and expertise at the University to highlight potential collaborations that would not have been thought of previously. This work allows for personalised support for academics looking at including a larger element of knowledge mobilisation and who are searching for partners for collaborative research projects.

**PROVING PRINCIPLES**

A key project that highlights the success of UQAM’s knowledge mobilisation activities is the work of Dr Joanne Otis, who is a professor in the Department of Sexology. Otis is aiming both to tackle the spread of HIV in Quebec and to help those with the disease in dealing with it personally. Particularly, she is interested in tackling the stigma and homophobia surrounding the disease.

As such, Otis’ projects are perhaps better described as community-based services that have undergone ongoing improvement by obtaining feedback from participants. The first of these projects – SPOT – offers free and anonymous HIV tests for gay men and men who have sex with men. The idea is to gain both a medical insight through the tracking of the disease and an insight to the problems HIV causes for these communities. Her community-based approach has meant that Otis has been able to provide pre- and post-test counselling to those taking the test and really understand the issues at hand for the individuals affected.

Additionally, Otis is working on a second HIV-related project – Pouvoir Partager/ Pouvoirs Partagés. The project is designed to aid HIV-positive woman to make the decision as to whether they will reveal they have the virus or not. This project aims to really understand sufferers’ experiences of disclosing their HIV status. Otis has held workshops to increase the awareness amongst HIV-positive women of the different options available to them. The results of these workshops have been overwhelmingly positive with participants reporting that they feel a greater sense of empowerment. “The success of the project has led to its export to Mali where being HIV-positive is seen as an absolute death sentence with no alternatives,” enthuses Dr Catherine Mounier, the Vice President of Research and Creation – the department under which SAC, SePSI and SRC are housed. “Crucially, it is the close engagement of Otis’ ideas with the people they actually concern at an early stage in her research that has led to such successful results.”

**THE FUTURE OF RESEARCH**

Perhaps unsurprisingly, UQAM is spreading the word about how knowledge mobilisation is helping make the University’s research and researchers more impactful and applicable to society. An example of this is the C’UExpo. At the conference, held in May
Mobilising knowledge

There are four research units under the umbrella of Research and Creation:

**RESEARCH AND CREATION SERVICES (SRC – www.src.uqam.ca):**
Supports a range of activities to advise researchers and innovators, for example, it may help them prepare grant applications (or provide assistance at various stages in funding application) or provide advisory services in terms of knowledge mobilisation.

**PARTNERSHIPS AND INNOVATION SUPPORT SERVICES (SePSI – www.sepsi.uqam.ca):**
Accompanies and supports researchers and innovators from UQAM in all steps leading to a partnership with the public and private sectors, as well as with organisations from civil society.

**OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (SRI – www.international.uqam.ca):**
Accompanies and supports researchers in developing international research partnerships as well as the exchange of students from all around the world.

**COMMUNITY SERVICES (SAC – www.sac.uqam.ca):**
Works to meet the needs of social groups not traditionally served by the University in partnership with the community. Examples of such partnerships include training projects, research, creation and dissemination. In fact, since its foundation, SAC has initiated more than 1,000 research and training activities.

“Our overarching goal is to establish a structured collaboration between these four units so they offer access to common resources and can provide the wider UQAM community with the support it needs to carry out knowledge mobilisation,” Professor Catherine Mounier, the Vice President of Research and Creation, says.

Mounier describes a concrete example of a project that has used UQAM’s knowledge mobilisation expertise to foster community-university engagement and thus improve the impact of its activities:

“A project with remarkable outcomes is Regime de Retraite, a pension plan for employees of community and women’s organisations in Quebec. With some 3,000 members and a healthy investment fund, the plan provides the economic security of good pension benefits to support the retirement of workers in the non-profit and social sector.

SAC and knowledge mobilisation were vital to the success of this project. The researchers first came to the University to ask for support in undertaking a study, but SAC came back to them and pointed out that they already knew the issue. Michel Lizée, Coordinator at SAC, helped the project’s proposers redefine its scope so that it drew in the relevant members of the community and thus created an outcome that is a useful pension plan actually managed by the community groups so that they can be in charge of their income security at retirement.”

2015, a member of SAC and like-minded comrades from across Canadian universities shared stories of many successful community-campus collaborations.

SAC is also taking its knowledge mobilisation activities further afield by joining forces with similar networks in Canada and parts of the world. For example, it is building close ties with Community Based Research in Canada, which is linked with the Living Knowledge Network in Europe and the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement in the UK. “Such collaborations allow for the sharing of experience and ideas in end user-based research, which will only help improve the nature of this research,” Simoneau states. “The expansion of knowledge mobilisation can only lead to improved research, and help to create stronger collaborations between UQAM professors and researchers and with their comrades around the world.”

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**KNOWLEDGE MOBILISATION AT UNIVERSITÉ DU QUÉBEC À MONTRÉAL**

**OBJECTIVE**
To facilitate the transfer of knowledge at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) by using knowledge mobilisation – through which innovations are co-constructed with the eventual users – instead of trying to force such knowledge after a project is realised.

**KEY COLLABORATORS**

Dr Sylvie B de Grosbois, former Director of Community Services (SAC), Associate Vice-President Academic and Research, Université du Québec en Outaouais, Canada • Dominique Robitaille, former Director of Research and Creation (SRC), Canada • Dr Caroline Roger, Director of Partnerships and Innovation Support Services (SePSI), Canada • Marcel Simoneau, Director of SAC, Canada

**PARTNERS**
Community-Based Research Canada – www.communityresearchcanada.ca
ResearchImpact-Réseaul’impactRecherche (RIR) – www.researchimpact.ca

**CONTACT**
Dr Catherine Mounier
Vice President of Research and Creation
Vice-rectorat à la vie académique
Université du Québec à Montréal
CP 8888, Succursale Centre-Ville
Montréal, H3C 3P8
Canada
T +1 514 987 3092
E mounier.catherine@uqam.ca
www.sac.uqam.ca
www.sepsi.uqam.ca
www.src.uqam.ca
www.international.uqam.ca

**CATHERINE MOUNIER** gained a BSc in Biochemistry in 1987 and an MSc in Molecular Chemistry in 1988 from the University of Rennes, France. She received her PhD in Cell and Molecular Biology at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure Agronomique de Rennes, France, in 1994. She joined UQAM in 2003 and is currently the Vice President of Research and Creation where she is a leader in knowledge mobilisation activities.

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