

Question

TO: Senate

QUESTION FROM: Senators Madeline Wilson and Bryan Buraga

RESPONSE FROM: Senator Christopher Manfredi, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic)

SUBJECT: Question and Response Regarding Support for Students and Alumni in Light of Law 21

MEETING DATE: September 18, 2019

PREAMBLE: On Sunday, June 16, 2019, Québec’s National Assembly passed Bill 21 “An Act respecting the laicity of the State” into law. Law 21 prohibits public workers in “positions of authority,” including teachers, judges, police officers and public prosecutors, from wearing religious symbols, and, in an added measure that particularly targets Muslim women, requires citizens to uncover their faces when receiving government services.

When past governments have put forward similar bills, McGill had publicly expressed its opposition—both in [2013](#) and in [2017](#).

When Bill 21 was first tabled, Provost and Vice-Principal (Academic) Christopher Manfredi wrote, in a [message](#) to the McGill community, that “as currently drafted, Bill 21 will not lead to any changes in our University’s policies or practices. [...] Should our understanding of its impact on the University change, we will advise the community and explore what steps are available to the University to mitigate the impact of Bill 21. While McGill accepts the principles of secularism and religious neutrality underlying the Bill, it does not support legislative developments that could restrict educational opportunities for our students or the professional opportunities of our graduates. We affirm our ongoing commitment to McGill’s [core principles](#), which include equity and inclusiveness.” A [Question to Senate](#) in April 2019 reaffirmed this stance.

When Bill 21 was signed into law, the Provost wrote, “inclusion is a fundamental value of the McGill community and the University reiterates its commitment to embrace and welcome diversity and inclusion. As a university in the Province of Quebec, McGill supports the broadest possible access to higher education and believes that the diversity of our community contributes to the richness of daily life, not only of our university but also of our city and province. While the law will not change our policies and practices, we are concerned that it will affect and

unnecessarily restrict some of our students' future employment opportunities.”

Arguably, neither of these statements constitute clear denouncements of Law 21. Moreover, since the passage of Law 21, McGill University has not announced any changes in policies and practices or the extension of specific support services to members of the communities most affected.

QUESTION: Is McGill University formally in opposition to or in support of Law 21?

Now that Law 21 has been passed, what concrete steps can McGill commit itself to taking to support students or recent graduates who are affected by Law 21, either personally or professionally?

RESPONSE: Thank you for your questions, Senators Wilson and Buraga.

In public statements concerning Bill 21 and Law 21 earlier this year, I confirmed the University's commitment to embracing and celebrating diversity, and to ensuring that our policies and practices would not change as a consequence of this legislation. McGill will continue to support the broadest possible access to higher education and we believe that the diversity of our community contributes to the richness of daily life – on our campuses, in Montréal, and across Québec. As you have noted in the preamble to your questions, I have also indicated that McGill does not support legislative developments that could restrict educational opportunities for our students or professional opportunities for our graduates.

Our new graduates are ready to contribute actively and positively to the development of a strong knowledge economy, and we are concerned that Law 21 will negatively affect and unnecessarily restrict some of our students' future employment opportunities in their home communities. Recent events involving certain Québec school boards—in a context where we are already facing a shortage of qualified teachers—are particularly disheartening. Limiting access to internship opportunities clearly goes beyond what is stipulated by legislation and contributes to a climate of uncertainty.

McGill will continue to uphold its commitment to supporting all our students who choose to pursue public sector career paths – in Education, but also in Nursing, Medicine, Law, and any other such field. The Faculty of Education, for example, is actively engaged with its students in this respect, answering questions regarding the current political climate, as well as facilitating meaningful learning experiences in supportive environments. Within our own community, moreover, we encourage and will continue to participate in active, constructive dialogue. To this end, the Shared Spaces program recently launched by the Office of the Dean of Students has included discussion of Law 21 and its implications in its Fall 2019 workshop and other programming.
