



MEDIA RELEASE For immediate release

A World First: A UNESCO Chair on the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism

Sherbrooke, February 23, 2018 – A world first, the UNESCO Chair on the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism (UNESCO-PREV Chair) was inaugurated today at Université de Sherbrooke, in partnership with UQAM and Concordia University, and in collaboration with the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. A number of Quebec and Canadian government stakeholders came together to highlight the importance of the initiative, which directly or indirectly affects millions of people worldwide.

During the inauguration, Jhon Carvajal gave enlightening testimony about the need for the new Chair. Carvajal is one of many people who have been affected by radicalization and violent extremism; he and his family fled their war-torn country of Colombia in 2005. As a teenage refugee, he experienced a challenging first few years in Quebec. Carvajal could have isolated himself and gone down the wrong path... but he chose a different course. Instead, Carvajal got involved with Dialogue +, a youth-driven project that offers a multitude of activities aimed at preventing discrimination in the face of prejudice and radicalization.

“Dialogue + is an example of concrete preventive action,” says David Morin, a professor at the Université de Sherbrooke and the co-president of Dialogue +. “It dovetails perfectly with one of the components of the new UNESCO-PREV Chair, which we are launching today.” Morin was actively involved in creating the Chair and is now a co-chairholder alongside two other recognized experts in prevention: Ghayda Hassan, a professor at UQAM, the director of CPN-PREV (the Canadian Practitioner Network for the Prevention of Radicalization and Extremist Violence) and a clinical psychologist; and Vivek Venkatesh, a professor at Concordia, the creator of the SOMEONE (Social Media Education Every Day) Project, and the director of the university’s Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance.

“This is a concrete outcome of the UNESCO conference on radicalization that we hosted in 2016, says Christine St-Pierre, Minister of International Relations and La Francophonie. “The creation of this chair is fully aligned with the priorities that the Quebec government set out in its action plan to combat radicalization. I am convinced that this research will contribute to our security, to the sharing of our values, and to the development of our society.”

“We want to take very concrete action,” explains Ghayda Hassan, UQAM professor and co-chairholder. “We will develop innovative research-based action programs based on best practices. We will provide a variety of training and resources to key stakeholders who are working in the field, particularly in social, education and community services settings.”

“We will also create public engagement tools to invite people to participate in developing a narrative to counter hate speech and radicalization, adds Vivek Venkatesh, Concordia University professor and co-chairholder. “We are already working on the SOMEONE Project for youth, schools, communities, and more broadly, the general public. It applies principles of social pedagogy that encourage the public to embrace inclusive digital media to combat the violent messages propagated by hate groups.”

“The scope of the projects conducted by the Chair will extend beyond Quebec and Canada to the rest of the world, as the Chair relies on an international network of recognized partners from all sectors of society who are involved in the prevention of radicalization leading to violence,” says Sami Aoun, professor of X at Université de Sherbrooke, and the scientific director of the Chair. “We already have close partnerships in North America, Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America, and others to come.”

Sébastien Goupil, Secretary General of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, says “UNESCO Chairs have become vitally important components in the United Nations system. Their contribution to the implementation of the sustainable development goals and to discussion of UNESCO’s priority issues is invaluable. We are proud to host the network of this new Chair, with its unique governance model uniting three major universities—a first in Canada and in the world. We look forward to working with the Chair to counter the rise of radicalization and violent extremism in Canada and the world.”

Maria Mourani, the Quebec government’s representative to the Permanent Delegation of Canada to UNESCO who is actively pursuing research into the recruitment of young people by jihadist groups, expressed her pleasure at the launch of the Chair: “Quebec has already staked out its position on the international stage, particularly with UNESCO, on an issue with such significant impact on national and international security. Research remains the foundation on which science-based policies and actions can be built. It is in our interest to further develop Quebec expertise on this matter. To deepen our knowledge of the issues, of course, but also to forge links with other countries facing the same problems.”

“The federal government is proud to partner with this Chair and help implement initiatives that result from its work,” the Canadian Minister of International Development and La Francophonie, the Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, declared proudly. “The chairholders will go above and beyond research to work with experts and communities of practice not only in Canada, but also around the world. We will benefit from enhanced programs to strengthen preventive measures against violent extremism.”

About the UNESCO Chair on the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism

The UNESCO-PREV Chair is the product of a partnership between l’Université de Sherbrooke, l’Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) and Concordia University. The primary mission of the Chair is to act as a centre of excellence to develop, share and promote primary, secondary and tertiary prevention research and activities on radicalization and violent extremism. With already close to 40 partners in Canada and abroad, the Chair will ensure close cooperation between researchers and communities of practice from a comparative, multidisciplinary and international perspective. The research centre is directed by three recognized experts in the field: Prof. David Morin from the Université de Sherbrooke, Prof. Ghayda Hassan from UQAM, and Prof. Vivek Venkatesh from Concordia. Prof. Sami Aoun, from l’Université de Sherbrooke, is the scientific director of the Chair.

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