Introduction

There are a number of issues and debates surrounding notions of citizenship, including how civil society prepares its population or particular sub-populations for engaged democratic participation. This is further complicated by diverse views about individual and national identities, immigration and policies and debates of accommodation versus assimilation. As globalization continues to blur individual, institutional and national boundaries, there are calls from and to multiple sectors to articulate productive methods for achieving the ideals of democracy and social cohesion. Institutions within the education sector – from early childhood through primary and secondary schools, onward to post-secondary and vocational education, and finally to those providing adult and lifelong learning – are all subject to these expectations. While each of these sub-sectors are instrumental to these issues, arguably post-secondary education is pivotal in that it is both a strategic enabler and subject to the knowledge and regulations arising from its research production.

The study of the relationship between the university and citizenship education has a long history, encompassing a huge diversity of writing including sociology, psychology, education and politics. There are of course a number of conceptual and intellectual positions from which to consider such questions. Whether one approaches this subject matter from broad political and/or theoretical analyzes of the prospective or actual roles played by the post-secondary educational sector, or perhaps from the influence of governments and other stakeholders, the possible theses and conclusions are legion. This is not a problem to be solved, but rather a business condition associated with these phenomena.

As such, this text is intended to contemplate the role and methods of post-secondary/tertiary sector educational institutions in preparing citizens for
meaningful participation in democracies, whether long-standing, young or emerging. The economic complexities of this era, and the ways in which deep-seated social tensions are activated, make post-secondary institutions (individually and collectively) particularly important to social cohesion and development since they are part of, and yet simultaneously apart from, the societies. As such, they can be though are not assuredly non-partisan facilitators and contributors, as well as keepers of long-sighted interests, even as they flex in varying ways and speeds in the face of demands for market responsiveness (e.g. workforce and economic development).

This comparative text especially considers Human Rights and Citizenship development in terms of how they are discerned, transmitted and reinforced through post-secondary institutions (whether as a sector and/or in particular contexts). We examine cases from Eastern Europe, Western Europe and North America because their respective situations provide notable opportunities for comparative analyzes and illustrations of important themes and discourses. Eastern European nations (for which even suggesting discernable regional boundaries is a contested exercise), with their post-socialist democracies in various stages of development, are faced with the daunting challenge of social reforms and the installation of new forms of civil society. This tenuous effort is occurring under the watchful gaze and involvement of Western nations, especially through the lens and infrastructure of the European Union and Commission. In Western Europe, tensions between national and European identities pose complex yet fascinating challenges for every sector of society. In the instance of post-secondary education, the traditional role of socialization is in competition with influences of such instruments as the Bologna and Erasmus processes, with their calls for calibration across nations for the purpose of migration and a competitive (so-called) Eurozone. This is made even thornier by the polarizing debt crisis, austerity measures, acute and emerging social movements, and political elections.

In North America, Canadian and U.S. societies hold their democratic histories and precepts uncritically as a given, as well as their influential roles (whether as peace builders, democracy spreaders or policing forces) in relation to rest of the world. These respective democratic experiments are messy and at times intimidating, but our contributors’ chapters invite hopeful yet resolute optimism. Our hope is that this text is both critical friend and encouraging colleague, intended to hasten readers’ thinking about what values guide them philosophically and/or pedagogically. Ideally it will be read with a willingness to reflect and refine, and a resolve to apply their learning toward inclusive democratic outcomes through the promise of higher education.

As the editors of this text, we serve as curators of a particular collection of perspectives and approaches offered by a cadre of talented and dedicated colleagues who have employed their respective lenses in considering the