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# Consumer Trends Update



## An Overview of Academic Consumer Interest Research in Canada

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# Consumer Trends Update

This Consumer Trends Update provides an overview of the status of academic consumer interest research (CIR), from a Canadian perspective. It first presents the challenges inherent to defining CIR and discusses the field's linkages to consumer policy-making. This is followed by some observations on the current state of academic CIR in Canada. Models of CIR-related academic networking activities are then presented as examples of how academic CIR can develop and contribute to policy-making. Such academic CIR contributions deserve further and sustained attention by all partners in the consumer policy community.

The *Consumer Trends Update* is published by the Office of Consumer Affairs, Industry Canada. It provides brief reports on research or policy developments related to themes explored in the 2005 *Consumer Trends Report*, which is available at:

[www.consumer.ic.gc.ca/trends](http://www.consumer.ic.gc.ca/trends).

## Introduction

This Update was developed as part of an ongoing project to better understand the state of consumer interest research (CIR) in Canada, and to address issues arising from that understanding. In 2005, the Office of Consumer Affairs of Industry Canada published a three-year study, *The Consumer Trends Report* (Industry Canada 2005). It provided an integrated overview of the challenges consumers are facing in the marketplace and their capacity to cope with those changes. In the course of conducting the analytical work for the Report, the department encountered significant difficulty in obtaining Canadian academic research in the consumer area. As noted in the Report:

“Unlike in the U.S. or the U.K., there is no Canadian academic journal devoted to consumer research issues, so there are few opportunities to exchange or showcase the results of consumer research. Further, no academic research funding programs on consumer issues exist, and there are no institutes or think tanks devoted to the subject.” (Industry Canada 2005)

Industry Canada undertook further research into the question of academic CIR and engaged in discussions with key leaders in Canadian university-based CIR. This Update presents results from that survey work on the state of CIR in Canada.

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## *Part One: What is Academic Consumer Interest Research?*

### Key CIR Concepts and Main CIR-Related Academic Sub-Disciplines

This Update focuses on academic consumer interest research (CIR) in Canada. CIR for the purposes of this document is the range of consumer-related academic research that is relevant to public policy-making. In preliminary work related to this Update, various terms were used to refer to the body of research concerned. McGregor 2012 provided a review of seminal work on delineating consumer disciplines, which suggested the use of a few key CIR concepts.

A very brief overview of McGregor's work is presented below, however, the reader is strongly encouraged to consult the original paper and its numerous CIR references. Research on the consumer interest, i.e. **consumer interest research**, concerns itself with both:

- a) the direct relationship between consumers and sellers, and
- b) the indirect, often latent, impact of this direct, reciprocal relationship on individuals, the economy and society more broadly (including major social issues, the impact of economic and fiscal policies, as well as corporate and marketing behavior).

CIR adopts a **consumer perspective** when it gives special weight to the interests of consumers relative to those of business, with the intent of shedding light on consumer imbalances. The term **consumer-business imbalances** refers to various forms of imbalances in the consumer-business relationship, which could in turn work against a consumer's interests during a market

#### **Other sources of CIR**

This Update focuses specifically on the CIR work of academic researchers, but other important sources of CIR also need to be acknowledged. A number of consumer organizations and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) produce CIR research that touches on a wide variety of issues.<sup>1</sup> Certain industry associations have research groups with experts that provide CIR-relevant information (e.g., banking, telecommunications). Think-tanks sometimes publish research that complements the CIR literature available on a topic. Beyond statistical agencies' obvious contributions to research, other government organizations' mandates involve the production of CIR-relevant research, as, on occasion do parliamentary and legislative committees and government regulatory bodies and commissions.<sup>2</sup>

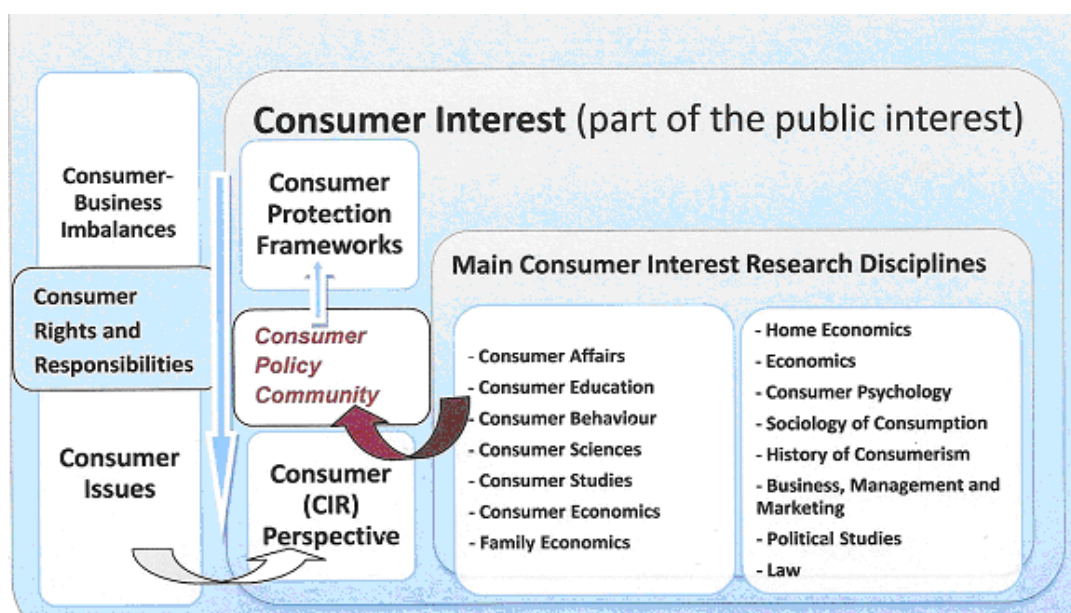
<sup>1</sup> The OCA's Contributions Program for Non-Profit Consumer and Voluntary Organizations is one source of support for such projects. The OCA Consumer Policy Research Database provides summaries for these OCA-funded research projects ([www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/oca-bc.nsf/eng/h\\_ca02236.html](http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/oca-bc.nsf/eng/h_ca02236.html)).

<sup>2</sup> For example, the OCA has undertaken consumer trends analyses (see [www.consumer.ic.gc.ca/trends](http://www.consumer.ic.gc.ca/trends)), and other governmental organizations publish sector-specific reports. For example, see Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada at <http://www4.agr.gc.ca/AAFC-AAC/display-afficher.do?id=1180119568363&lang=eng>.

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transaction.<sup>3</sup> Reacting to such consumer-business imbalances (notably product safety shortcomings), consumer advocates spearheaded a social movement in the 1960s that led to significant government policy activity, which came to be articulated as fundamental consumer rights and attendant responsibilities (discussed below, under Linkages to consumer policymaking). References to **consumer rights and responsibilities** – such as in the form of “consumers have the right to...” – are now common in consumer interest scholarship. When problems occur, the term **consumer issues** is used to describe the situation; traditional categories of issues include economic security, health and safety, competition, etc. Taken together, the various types of policy responses to consumer issues form the **consumer protection** frameworks that are designed to address areas of potential consumer harm.

**Figure 1** Interrelated consumer concepts and contributing academic disciplines



Source: Reprinted from McGregor 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Conventional economic theory typically uses the concept of marketplace failure to describe such situations; McGregor 2012 expands the concept to include a broader set of potential imbalances.

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Figure 1 illustrates the interrelations between these key CIR concepts, and also identifies the main academic disciplines of relevance in the CIR context. The reality is that there is no single commonly acknowledged academic field that captures the breadth of consumer-interest studies. McGregor 2012 produced a list of 15 CIR-related sub-disciplines, which covers long-standing disciplines explicitly focused on the consumer interest, as well as other well-established academic disciplines that, while not focused on consumer interest analysis, have also traditionally conducted research on some aspect of CIR. The enduring and well-established nature of academic attention to consumer matters is illustrated, for example, by the 2008 celebration of the centennial of the International Federation of Home Economists who were in many respects the pioneers at the university level of CIR. Recent years have also seen emerging work seeking to constitute a new field of CIR, transformative consumer research (see textbox).

## **Transformative Consumer Research**

Transformative Consumer Research (TCR) is a movement within the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) that emphasizes the consumer perspective: it “seeks to encourage, support, and publicize research that benefits consumer welfare and quality of life”.<sup>4</sup> TCR is intended to respond to some long-standing issues debated among scholars with respect to marketing and consumer behaviour research (e.g. the view that there is “an unbalanced focus that favors a managerial perspective”, which was expressed by “several scholars who called for a broader approach in consumer research that emphasized the importance of customer perspective” (Mari 2008). A recent TCR development is the publication of the first edited book on the subject, which noted the multidisciplinary challenges of conducting research in a complex, fragmented arena where researchers have “often used disparate research paradigms, theories, and methods” and where consumer research insights “tend to reside in disconnected silos of institutes, agencies, associations, and publication outlets” (Mick et al. 2011) Canadian researchers have been actively engaged in this work to expand the consumer research perspective. Nine Canadian-based academics contributed to the development of the TCR publication and another three participated as reviewers.

The breadth of academic disciplines that have the potential to contribute to CIR obviously provides great opportunities from a knowledge-building perspective. However, this breadth also leads to inherent challenges for research development, collaboration and diffusion.

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<sup>4</sup> See the TRC section on the ACR website, at [www.acrwebsite.org/web/section/transformative-consumer-research.aspx](http://www.acrwebsite.org/web/section/transformative-consumer-research.aspx).

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## *Multidisciplinary Challenges of Consumer Scholarship*

As illustrated in Figure 1, CIR involves research and expertise that is drawn from a number of social science disciplines, and uses vocabulary that is drawn from generic, everyday language. Compared to natural sciences, for example, this can be perceived as a complicating factor in the development of a common, consistent understanding of the scope of CIR, given that “Communication of social science research does not generally employ a vocabulary that is specific to a field of inquiry, making it substantially more difficult to distinguish the output that can be clearly attributable to these fields.” (Archambault et al. 2008) <sup>5</sup>

Researchers themselves have long recognized the communication and collaboration impacts resulting from the multidisciplinary nature of CIR, as illustrated by this comment in the editorial note in the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*' first edition:

“In view of today’s inundation with the printed word, a few comments might be in order about “Why another journal?” Individual articles in this and future issues of the Journal might have appeared in other journals (though, admittedly, some of the journals of the traditional disciplines seem not to reflect the ground swell of activity in the consumer field), but, except for those whose journal-reading scope covers an extremely wide range, many such articles would go unnoticed by consumer specialists in other disciplines.” (Bivens 1967)

In more recent years, the multi-dimensional nature of consumer scholarship appears to have expanded even within its existing publications. McGregor 2007 completed a decade review of papers published in the *International Journal of Consumer Studies* between 1997 and 2006 which highlighted that while papers in the first two-thirds of the decade focused on consumption in the conventional sense (food and nutrition, clothing and textiles, etc.), the latter part of the period had seen the addition of more complex cultural and political dimensions:

“There was less focus on a particular good or service, and more attention to the larger context within which consumption and production are happening: biotechnological innovation, globalization, telecommunications and technological innovations (especially e-commerce), mono-cultures and localization. There was more balance between studying how consumers make choices and understanding how retailers prepare to engage with consumers. Authors also started to augment effective and rational consumer decision making with ethical and moral perspectives.” (McGregor 2007)

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<sup>5</sup> After testing a number of keyword search queries, Archambault et al. 2008 concluded with a generic “consumer (consommateur)” search methodology.

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Beyond the above-identified CIR-related subdisciplines, sector-based research fields provide a home for other important CIR scholarship. In sector-based fields such as retail studies, agricultural studies, health science, information technologies etc., some scholars are indeed investigating social and technological trends that have implications for the consumer interest. However, there is some evidence that academic experts involved in sector-specific work that is CIR-relevant might not spontaneously self-identify as CIR academics, which may have negative impacts on research collaboration, dissemination, and access.<sup>6</sup> This again underscores the knowledge-sharing challenges faced by research domains that are by nature multidisciplinary.

## *[Linkages to consumer policy-making](#)*

2012 marked the 60th anniversary of President Kennedy's speech to the U.S. Congress on "Protecting the Consumer Interest" (Kennedy 1962). The core rights he outlined formed the basis for the 1982 charter of consumer rights<sup>7</sup> issued by the NGO Consumers International, and the latter's successful lobbying for the adoption of the 1985 United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection<sup>8</sup>. The 1960s and 1970s saw strong consumer activism, where the importance of academic CIR for policy-making was acknowledged, including across borders. For example, in the mid 1970s, the U.S. Consumer Affairs Institute organized multi-stakeholder conferences related to consumer policy research.<sup>9</sup> Early in the same decade, the Consumer Research Council of Canada was created with a mandate that included a responsibility "to advise the Minister and the Department of Consumer and Corporate Affairs on consumer research activities which are being carried on in Canadian universities and elsewhere, and on the available sources of research on particular consumer problems" (CRCC 1973). In the 1980s, there were further calls for a greater role for academic consumer research in policy-making, notably from consumer advocates such as the Consumer Federation of America:

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<sup>6</sup> Industry Canada received such comments through informal discussions held in 2011 with a group of Canadian academics from across the country whose work involved CIR-related research.

<sup>7</sup> For a list of CI's eight consumer rights, see [www.consumersinternational.org/who-we-are/consumer-rights](http://www.consumersinternational.org/who-we-are/consumer-rights).

<sup>8</sup> Following a July 2012 ad hoc expert meeting on consumer protection held at the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the UNCTAD Secretariat "was requested to prepare a draft report containing proposals for revised guidelines [UN Guidelines on Consumer Protection]" ([http://unctad.org/fr/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=192&Sitemap\\_x0020\\_Taxonomy=OSG](http://unctad.org/fr/pages/newsdetails.aspx?OriginalVersionID=192&Sitemap_x0020_Taxonomy=OSG;)).

<sup>9</sup> "A recent NSF Project (Consumer Affairs Institute 1976) brought together an altogether remarkably [sic] assemblage of consumer advocates, consumer "bureaucrats", consumer affairs people from business, and consumer researchers to identify, through organized brainstorming sessions, important consumer research problems. A second NSF-sponsored Conference (Denney and Lund, 1978) included researchers, businessmen, consumer advocates and academics and *ex post* sought their reactions to the consumer policy research that was reported at the Conference." (Maynes 1979)

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“(…) there is great need to evaluate both those marketplace imperfections alleged to harm consumers and those public interventions intended to correct such imperfections. (…) Because of their training and disinterest, consumer researchers are well-suited to examine these critical public policy issues – particularly the consumer impact of both market imperfections and the public interventions designed to correct them.” (Brobeck 1988)

Governments have regularly sought academic CIR input in the context of policy-making processes.<sup>10</sup> Through the creation of advisory groups, significant CIR-related research has been produced, notably on the topic of financial services.<sup>11</sup> Certain governmental organizations have also encouraged CIR-relevant research efforts through research funding programs that target or are inclusive of academia.<sup>12</sup> To address topic-specific needs, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada launched in 2004 an Agriculture Policy Research Network. The initiative led to the development of five networks, one of which addresses food consumer and market demand issues.<sup>13</sup>

Another aspect of the role of consumer interest researchers in policy making is through their presence in the work of legislative bodies and government institutions:

“The path of policy research often assumes that a division of labor exists, with researchers generating relevant results that are used by politicians or pro-consumer groups to influence laws and regulations. However, consumer researchers also can and do take a more active role by testifying before legislative bodies or working as government consultants.” (Mick et al. 2011)

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<sup>10</sup> As noted in the textbox on page 2, other entities such as NGOs also contribute important CIR work and their representatives also regularly participate in governments’ various policy-making processes.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, research completed for various governments’ initiatives:

- Expert Panel on Securities Regulation, at [www.expertpanel.ca/eng/reports/research-studies/index.html](http://www.expertpanel.ca/eng/reports/research-studies/index.html);
- Task Force on Financial Literacy, at [www.financialliteracyincanada.com/documents/research-reports.html](http://www.financialliteracyincanada.com/documents/research-reports.html);
- Task Force on the Future of the Canadian Financial Services Sector (MacKay Task Force), at <http://publications.gc.ca/collections/Collection/F21-6-1998-8-1E.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> For example, the Office of the Superintendent of Bankruptcy has a “For Academics” section on its website, which identifies research produced through its Insolvency Research Initiative. The latter was established “to increase the body of knowledge about the Canadian insolvency system and financial literacy and to stimulate interest among academics in multidisciplinary and comparative research on related fields” ([http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/bsf-osb.nsf/eng/h\\_br01667.html](http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/bsf-osb.nsf/eng/h_br01667.html)). The Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada has also awarded funding to a number of academics through its Contributions Program ([www.priv.gc.ca/resource/cp/p\\_index\\_e.asp](http://www.priv.gc.ca/resource/cp/p_index_e.asp)).

<sup>13</sup> The Consumer and Market Demand Agricultural Policy Research Network is hosted at the University of Alberta – see their website at [www.consumerdemand.rees.ualberta.ca/](http://www.consumerdemand.rees.ualberta.ca/).



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## Academic CIR's impact on policy-making: supporting the consumer interest voice

At a recent symposium on privacy technologies, the role of academic research for privacy protection policy was illustrated from the perspective of the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC):

“Direct references to academic research in documentation from the Commission is not the only way to identify impact. Oftentimes investigations are spurred by well documented complaints by organizations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) and Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC). The recent investigation and subsequent settlement between the FTC and Facebook followed a complaint by a coalition of consumer groups led by EPIC. The complaint cites a number of academic work, such as Arvind Narayan and Vitaly Schmatikov's work, “De-anonymizing Social Networks” and writing by Ed Felten of Princeton University.” (Brennan 2012)

At the federal level, various House of Commons committees have included input received from CIR-related academic witnesses.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in Quebec, CIR-related debates in parliamentary committees of the National Assembly have involved representatives from academia.<sup>15</sup> Academic experts also share their insights through submissions to department-led public consultations, at both the federal and provincial levels.<sup>16</sup>

In 2010, the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development published the Consumer Policy Toolkit, which relied on academic CIR for much of its content on the economics of consumer policy and consumer policy instruments (OECD 2010). In Canada, the Industry Canada 2010 Consumer Impact Assessment Guide acknowledged the role of academic work in policy-making. It identified regular liaison with academics as one of the ways for ensuring continuous improvement in government policy managers' ability to properly recognize the consumer interest (Industry Canada 2010).

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<sup>14</sup> Examples from the House of Commons include:

- E-commerce in Canada: Pursuing the Promise, report of the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology (41st Parliament);
- The *Privacy Act*: First Steps Towards Renewal, report of the Standing Committee on Access to Information, Privacy and Ethics (40th Parliament);
- The examination on the administration and operation of the *Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act* and the *Companies' Creditors Arrangement Act* (37th Parliament).

<sup>15</sup> Examples from Quebec's National Assembly include:

- Consultations particulières et auditions publiques sur le projet de loi n° 24, *Loi visant principalement à lutter contre le surendettement des consommateurs et à moderniser les règles relatives au crédit à la consommation* (39e législature);
- Consultations particulières sur le projet de loi n° 60 — *Loi modifiant la Loi sur la protection du consommateur et d'autres dispositions législatives* (39e législature).

<sup>16</sup> CIR-related examples from Industry Canada include the consultation paper on a Digital Economy Strategy for Canada and the Canadian copyright consultation.

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## *Part Two: Academic Consumer Interest Research in Canada*

### *Programs in consumer studies/sciences*

Three decades ago, Kroll and Hunt presented consumer-interest study as an emerging discipline that was at the interdisciplinary stage of its evolution, where practitioners from related disciplines recognize the desirability of coordinated efforts. The authors anticipated a next stage, i.e. that the consumer interest area could become more than an interdisciplinary area of study:

“In the uni-disciplinary stage, a field achieves unique disciplinary status. That is, the important elements of its nature are recognized as distinguished from those of the traditional disciplines with which it is most closely associated.” (Kroll and Hunt 1980, p. 268)

Kroll and Hunt had suggested that, while not crucial, establishing an appropriate title for this field of research could contribute to the general acceptance of the field’s uni-disciplinary potential. There is still no single, commonly recognized title for a CIR-related academic field, as illustrated by Figure 1. This lack of a single title makes it difficult to assess the presence of consumer-interest programs in higher education institutions.

Today, only the Universities of Guelph and Laval can be readily identified as having programs with consumer studies / sciences as their principle *raison d’être*.<sup>17</sup> However, relevant programs likely exist in other (sub)disciplines, such as the traditionally consumer-focused disciplines of home economics and human ecology. For example, Smith and de Zwart 2010 noted that seven universities Canada-wide offered after degree programs in home economics/family studies teacher education (University of British Columbia, University of Alberta, University of Manitoba, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education / University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario, York, Mount St Vincent) and two universities offered concurrent programs (Saskatchewan and Moncton). The identification of all potentially relevant departments is not straightforward, given various changes in nomenclature and restructuring having occurred in home economics and consumer sciences programs.<sup>18</sup> Special CIR-relevant programs may also exist in various

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<sup>17</sup> Guelph University has a Master of Science/ Department of Marketing and Consumer Studies program. Université Laval offers a "Baccalauréat en sciences de la consommation" and a "Certificat en sciences de la consommation" and, since the Fall 2011 session, a « Maîtrise en agroéconomie – consommation ».

<sup>18</sup> For example, in their review of 1967-2007 feature articles published in the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, James and Cude 2009 reported difficulties in assigning an academic department to authors because of such nomenclature issues.”

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university departments across Canada, such as the international, graduate-level Summer School in Consumer Law that was co-organized in 2011 and 2009 by the Groupe de recherche en droit international et comparé de la consommation (GREDICC), a research unit within the University of Quebec in Montreal's (UQAM) Faculty of Law and Political Science.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, today's situation seems to reflect a downward trend in various CIR-related programs, which brings with it important consequences. In her review of the status of consumer education in Canada, McGregor 2000 noted that:

“Much has changed within the university climate regarding consumer studies and I know of only six units that offer consumer education topics or courses in 2000. This decline in departments and course offerings means that fewer teachers will enter the school system with preparation in consumer education, and by association, are much less likely to teach consumer education even if there is an existing curriculum (...)” (McGregor 2000)

Such concerns about teacher preparation in CIR-relevant (sub)disciplines are still present, as noted more recently in a 2010 study of home economics teacher education. Smith and Zwart 2010 illustrated “that the problem of the declining supply of home economics teachers is a world-wide phenomenon” and highlighted issues in Canada, in the context of the dismantling or re-structuring of many home economics programs:

“Potential home economics teachers do not necessarily have a common background: some may have degrees in family relations, applied nutrition, consumer studies, fashion design, or some other combination. Related concerns include replacements of retiring professors of home economics education, the continued marginalization and struggle for survival of small programs, and the effects of international recruitment of Canadian home economics/family studies teachers.” (Smith and Zwart 2010)

In their analysis of the content of Canadian university consumer education courses.<sup>20</sup> McGregor and MacDonald 1997 had also noted concerns with nature of the programs, as their results inferred that “any student intending to get a BED [Bachelor of Education] to teach family studies / home economics was provided an opportunity to learn money and resource management, decision making and financial planning but less so consumer protection and advocacy” (reported in McGregor 2000).

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<sup>19</sup> See information on the 2011 program at [www.gredicc.uqam.ca/spip.php?rubrique47](http://www.gredicc.uqam.ca/spip.php?rubrique47).

<sup>20</sup> They examined 58 of a possible 102 courses from 14 university programs.

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In 2008, Industry Canada undertook a summary analysis<sup>21</sup> of the course titles and descriptions from the 92 Canadian public and private not-for-profit universities and university-degree level colleges that were listed on the website of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC).<sup>22</sup> The analysis found 131 undergraduate courses with 'consumer or consommateur' in the title.<sup>23</sup> Eighty-one of these, or just over 60%, were found to be consumer / buyer behaviour courses, often taught in schools of commerce or business, with an emphasis on consumer decision processes and the influence of social, cultural, and psychological factors on how consumers behave in marketplace transactions. In comparison, only twenty-four courses had a focus on consumer protection or consumer legal issues. Overall, courses appeared less geared toward the consumer interest.

A similar trend towards emphasizing commercial interests in consumer-related programs was noted in a 2005 report on *The Need for Postgraduate Education in Consumer Affairs in the European Union*: "While they do indeed deal with consumer issues, their predominant logic is that of the marketing and sale of products and services rather than that of the protection and empowerment of the consumer." (Quici et al., 2005). Commissioned by the Directorate General for Health and Consumer Protection (DG SANCO) of the European Commission (EC), the report recommended the creation of a European master-degree program in consumer affairs, a proposal that was realized in 2009 (see textbox).

## **EURECA: European Union Master's Programme in Consumer Affairs**

The EURECA master's degree program was started in 2009. It was created to improve the supply of highly educated and qualified employees in the field of consumer affairs. The program is offered through a consortium of four European universities. Students follow courses on the basics of consumer affairs, and must then choose two of the ten specializations offered:

- Consumer Affairs Management;
- Consumer Economics
- Consumer Studies;
- Consumer, Technology and Innovation;
- Economics and Management;
- Food Policy and Management;
- Marketing;
- Marketing Management;
- Markets and Innovation; and,
- Sustainable Consumption.

Source: [www.eureca.wi.tum.de/index.php?id=7](http://www.eureca.wi.tum.de/index.php?id=7).

<sup>21</sup> The more detailed 1997 study by McGregor and McDonald has not been repeated.

<sup>22</sup> Research assistance was provided by Laura Tryssenaar, education consultant, in the winter of 2007-2008. In this work, course calendars were reviewed to provide trends analysis.

<sup>23</sup> Another 326 courses had 'consumer or consommateur' somewhere in the course description, but were not considered in the context of Industry Canada's summary analysis.

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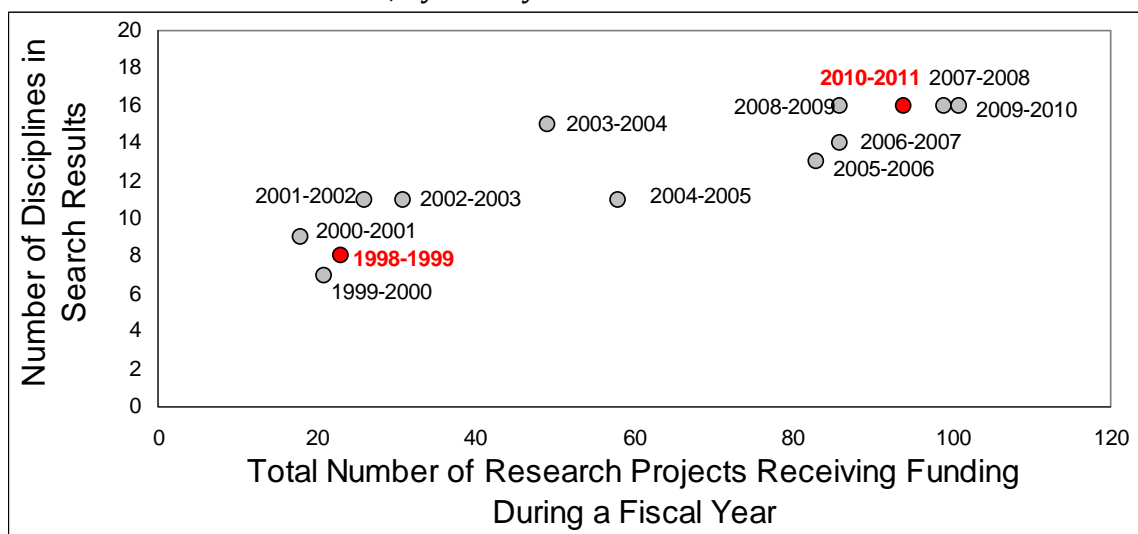
## Funding of Academic CIR

The absence of a clearly-defined title for the CIR domain also makes it difficult to analyze the funding arrangements under which it takes place. In terms of public funding, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and various public policy entities (primarily government departments and agencies) are likely the major source of funds for specific CIR projects.

SSHRC provides detailed electronic information on all of its funding. However, a reliably complete picture of the Council's funding of CIR work cannot be guaranteed, due to the lack of straightforward search terms (a single discipline title, or unique specialized vocabulary). Nonetheless, a CIR search was conducted by Industry Canada, using 'consumer or consommateur' in the 'title and keyword' field of the SSHRC database. For contribution year 2010-2011, the results from this broad consumer search included 94 research projects, dispersed across 16 various disciplines. Figure 2 illustrates how the number of 'consumer' search results has grown, in parallel with an increase in the number of disciplines associated to the results.

While the total number of 'consumer or consommateur' results in a given fiscal year picks up duplicates from the previous year (i.e. projects that received payments over more than one fiscal year), this nonetheless represents one base for consideration to identify potential scholars who have been involved in CIR and insights that may be relevant for consumer policy.

**Figure 2** Results for 'title and keyword' search using 'consumer or consommateur' in SSHRC database, by fiscal year



\* Note: The total number of projects receiving SSHRC funding over the course of a given fiscal year includes duplicates from the total number of projects identified in the previous fiscal year, given that a number of SSHRC projects are eligible to receive payments over more than one fiscal year.

Source: Industry Canada searches on the SSHRC Awards Search Engine ([www.outil.ost.uqam.ca/CRSH/RechProj.aspx](http://www.outil.ost.uqam.ca/CRSH/RechProj.aspx)).

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However, the use of a simple “consumer or consommateur” keyword search is a very imperfect approach, and subject to other constraints associated to the search tool. For example, the ‘consumer’ subset of 94 projects compares to a total of more than 9,600 projects that received some SSHRC funding in 2010-2011. While not captured by a ‘consumer’ search, a number of these other projects undoubtedly have some relevance to CIR, but they are not easily identifiable.

In addition, while three of the 94 results for 2010-2011 that are illustrated in Figure 2 refer to Canada Research Chairs<sup>24</sup>, further investigation of the Canada Research Chairs’ own database<sup>25</sup> indicates that other Chairs have definite importance in terms of CIR-related work.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the “consumer or consommateur” keyword search on the Canada Research Chairs program’s database provided many more results than the “consumer or consommateur” search in the SSHRC Awards Search Engine. A greater number of research chairs would have been identified with the use of additional keywords such as “consumption”, “marketplace” or a number of other CIR-related terms. However, the CIR-relevance of such expanded search results would need to be assessed.<sup>27</sup>

As previously highlighted (under *Linkages to consumer policy-making*), academic CIR can also be commissioned in the context of formal advisory or consultative work in the public sector. In addition, in the regular course of their monitoring and analytical work, government departments periodically contract with experts to obtain subject-specific reports. However, it is very difficult to identify these reports, let alone analyze the CIR-related results obtained through this approach. The analysis provided under contract to policy makers is not necessarily published in stand-alone documents, and thus may not always be readily located through online or other searches.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Canada Research Chair in Behavioural Science and Electronic Commerce, Chair in Social Justice, Equity and Diversity, and Canada Research Chair in Consumer Behaviour.

<sup>25</sup> See [www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/chairholders-titulaires/index-eng.aspx](http://www.chairs-chaire.gc.ca/chairholders-titulaires/index-eng.aspx).

<sup>26</sup> For example, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, Canada Research Chair in Internet and E-Commerce Law, and Canada Research Chair in Information Technology Management.

<sup>27</sup> The keyword search queries tested by Archambault et al 2008. further illustrate the difficulties in identifying CIR in the absence of a discipline-specific tag: “In a field like CIR, this balancing act rapidly becomes much more of an art form than hard science. Choosing between recall and precision is not an easy decision, and several keyword queries were developed and tested in attempts to increase the recall without compromising precision. None of the queries tested during this study were highly selective, meaning that they invariably retrieved a large number of false positives and exerted an unacceptable toll on precision.”

<sup>28</sup> The federal government proactively discloses information on contracts over \$10,000, but some research projects done under contract by academic researchers for government agencies fall under that threshold. Another challenge to the identification of CIR-specific contracts lies in the pre-determined work categories that use broad terms, such as “management consulting” or “research contracts” (the latter being used for various research, not only work completed by academics).

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Researchers involved in CIR may also be tapping into various other sources of funding. At the provincial level, for example, researchers in Québec can also access funds through the Fonds de recherche du Québec - Société et culture.<sup>29</sup> A CIR-specific foundation also exists : the Fondation Claude Masse's mission is to support research into and the dissemination of knowledge related to law, economics and other fields that study consumption and how markets work, and to promote the development of and compliance with legislation pertaining to consumption, competition and the workings of markets.<sup>30</sup> These and other examples further extend the number of disperse sources that would need to be explored for a more detailed review of CIR in Canada.

## Publication of Canadian academic CIR

There are currently no Canadian-based peer-reviewed scholarly journals specifically dedicated to CIR. An exception from the past was the *Canadian Home Economics Journal*, which published from 1950 up until the Canadian Home Economics Association's dissolution in 2003 and included a refereed section for original academic research articles.<sup>31</sup> That is not to say that publication of Canadian academic CIR is nonexistent today. Canadian academic CIR has been published in such international publications as the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, the *Journal of Consumer Education*, the *Journal of Consumer Policy*, the *Journal of Consumer Research*, the *Journal of Family and Economic Issues* and the *International Journal of Consumer Studies*. Interestingly, while some scholars have noted that publishing in such international journals has obliged them to dilute the Canadian content or focus of their work, others have never experienced this phenomenon.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, a number of CIR-related Canadian papers have been published through Canadian academic journals not specific to CIR. These include multidisciplinary publications (e.g., *Canadian Social Science*) as well as disciplinary-specific journals (e.g., *Canadian Journal of Agricultural Economics*). Canadian academic work has similarly been published in international non-CIR-specific journals.

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<sup>29</sup> See [www.fqrsc.gouv.qc.ca/fr/fqrsc-en-bref/mission.php](http://www.fqrsc.gouv.qc.ca/fr/fqrsc-en-bref/mission.php).

<sup>30</sup> See <http://fondationclaudemasse.org/>.

<sup>31</sup> The Canadian Home Economics Foundation (a non-profit organization supporting home economics and family and consumer economics research) has begun to archive back issues of the Canadian Home Economics Journal at <http://chef-fcef.ca/journal/index.htm>.

<sup>32</sup> Industry Canada noted such comments through various informal discussions with Canadian academics from across the country whose work involved CIR-related research.

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## A new type of CIR-related journal: online Journal of Research for Consumers<sup>34</sup>

“To date, however, the Web journals to which academics contribute continue to target academic, and to a lesser extent, managerial audiences. There is thus the opportunity to establish a Web journal that can provide a forum for academic research to be communicated to both academic and layman audiences. Such a journal would need to achieve the two objectives of communicating research findings to consumers and satisfying the legitimacy requirements of those determining the quality of academic publications through such processes as double-blind peer review. The Journal of Research for Consumers is structured to attend to both of these objectives. It has two streams of articles, catering to the two different audiences to which it is directed. One stream contains articles that report consumer-oriented research findings with the academic rigour associated with traditional journals. A second stream is comprised of articles that convey the same research findings communicated in layman’s terms. Stripped of their jargon and extensive citations, these articles are targeted directly at consumers. (...) Contributors to the journal are thus required to provide two versions of their papers – one to be directed at academic audiences and one to be directed to the general public.” (Pettigrew 2001)

There are also consumer-interest related topic areas defined in the open-access multi-field Social Science Research Network (SSRN) eLibrary<sup>34</sup> which consists largely of working papers or pre-publication versions of scholarly articles, including items from Canadian researchers; there are also relevant abstracting eJournals on the site. Examples of CIR-relevant SSRN network elements include: *Consumer Law eJournal*<sup>35</sup>, *Microeconomics: Intertemporal Consumer Choice & Savings eJournal*, *Consumer Social Responsibility eJournal*, and *Behavioural Marketing eJournal*. SSRN is an increasingly popular outlet for academic researchers (over 200,000 authors have contributed to SSRN, as of August 30, 2012). While an open access service such as SSRN may not be as valuable to academics in terms of career advancement (e.g. may not meet the publication standards required for the purposes of tenure), it can play an important role in research dissemination and collaboration. In their survey work with European journal authors, Fry et al. 2011 concluded that the central role of peer-reviewed journal articles in academic careers is not diminishing. However, they also noted that authors within the social sciences, humanities and arts were among the most likely to feel that depositing works in an open access repository (OAR) was definitely worthwhile.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> See [www.jrconsumers.com](http://www.jrconsumers.com).

<sup>34</sup> See [www.ssrn.com/](http://www.ssrn.com/).

<sup>35</sup> The eJournal is structured along the following five topics: Consumer Credit & Payment Issues, Enforcement of Consumer Laws, Miscellaneous Consumer Matters, Other Issues Involving the Sale of Goods or Services to Consumers, Regulation of Information & Privacy Issues Involving Consumers.

<sup>36</sup> “As an illustration, one social sciences, humanities & arts workshop participant, familiar with RePEc [Research Papers in Economics] and SSRN (both subject-based repositories), explained that by using OAR [open access repository] individually or in combination one could gain recognition for a body of work rather than for individual publications.” (Fry et al. 2011).



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Wanting to further examine the level and comparative status of academic consumer research in Canada, Industry Canada commissioned Science-Metrix to provide a bibliometric analysis of peer-reviewed journals. The objectives of the study were to examine the quantity of published Canadian academic work on consumer issues research, and the split between consumer-interest and commercial-interest work, and then to compare these numbers to those in other leading countries in this field. The bibliometric study covered the period from 1996 to 2007 and was based on an assessment of research output published in peer-reviewed papers indexed in the Scopus database.<sup>37</sup> In the absence of discipline-specific terminology, the Science-Metrix methodology also relied on a “consumer” only search.

## **An imperfect working definition of research concerned with consumer issues**

The Science-Metrix report (Archambault et al. 2008) occurred at an early stage of Industry Canada’s academic consumer interest research project. At that time, the term “consumer issues research” was used to define the focus of the work. Defining the field and delimiting the core set of papers to be used was one of the main challenges faced early on in the Science-Metrix work. An operational definition was adopted, with limitations compared to the CIR definition used in this Update – for example:

- Focus was given to the Industry Canada mandate, and issues linked with health and food were largely set aside whenever possible; and,
- The need to capture contributions from long-standing CIR-related disciplines (e.g., home economics) was not explicitly acknowledged and targeted in that preliminary work.

The bibliographic analysis nonetheless provides an initial glimpse into the CIR developed in Canada. Since that time, a number of comments have been received regarding the issue of conceptual slippage in this multidisciplinary field and the need to clarify the consumer-related terms developed by some long-standing disciplines. McGregor 2012 provides a review of this academic background.

The study concluded that Canada had some degree of specialization in consumer issues research, ranking 9th among the leading countries in the field (see Figure 3). In order to estimate the proportion of policy-relevant papers, the abstracts of a sample of these consumer issues papers were further analyzed to categorize them as relevant to policy, business or general

<sup>37</sup> “Scopus, launched in November 2004, is the largest abstract and citation database containing both peer-reviewed research literature and quality web sources”; see [www.info.sciverse.com/scopus/scopus-in-detail/content-coverage-guide](http://www.info.sciverse.com/scopus/scopus-in-detail/content-coverage-guide). The CIR-related titles found in Scopus, while not comprehensive of all CIR work, include *Advances in Consumer Research*, *Journal of Consumer Affairs*, and *Journal of Consumer Policy*. Another limitation of this database is that it only includes references in English, and therefore excludes French scientific journals published in Québec and which may count CIR-relevant articles.

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interest in consumer issues research, or whether they were outside of the field.<sup>38</sup> Based on this attempt to quantify the distribution of CIR papers, Canadian researchers appear to publish a much smaller proportion of their papers on issues related to public policy compared to other leading countries – there was a greater emphasis on the commercial aspects of CIR in Canada.<sup>39</sup>

This is similar to the trend previously noted with respect to consumer-related university courses where there was an emphasis on courses concerned with the consumer marketplace issues such as how and why consumers purchase goods or services (under *Programs in consumer studies/sciences*).

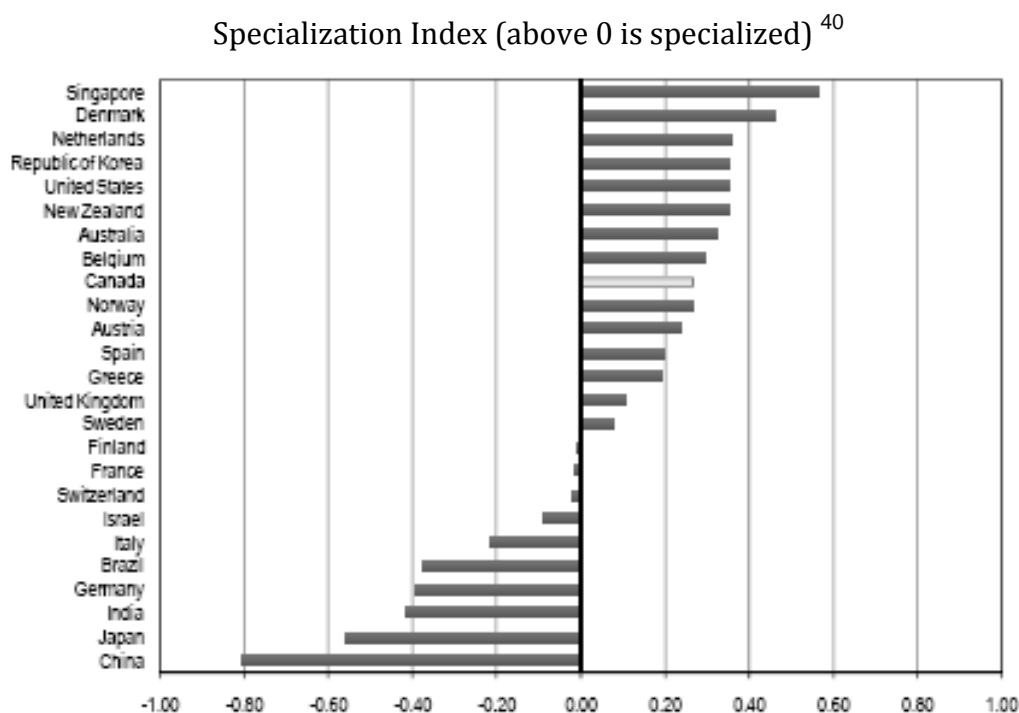
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<sup>38</sup> The protocol used in the context of the Science-Metrix work defined each category as follows: 1. Consumer Policy Research - Research that is undertaken with the primary intent of better protecting or advancing consumers' interests, be it by better understanding consumers' interactions with the marketplace in terms of vulnerabilities or benefits, analysing consumer legislation, regulations and policies, or other similar policy work. 2. Consumer Business Research - Research that is undertaken with the primary intent of understanding consumers and their interactions with the marketplace for the purposes of being able to benefit from that understanding for a commercial benefit. 3. General Consumer Research - Research undertaken to understand consumers for any other reason, sociological, anthropological, historical or macro-economic. 4. Not Relevant - Research that may use "consumer" or "customer" concepts and analytical models (e.g., customer relationship management – CRM) but whose focus is not primarily consumers but other third parties (e.g. businesses dealing with each other); research about consumers where they are not acting as independent agents (e.g. consumers as patients in the health care system) or research focused on protecting consumers in the context of health or safety concerns (e.g. food and product safety).

<sup>39</sup> According to Archambault et al. 2008, Canadian authors publish about 30% fewer papers in this area than what is observed, on average, for consumer issues research in other countries. More precisely, about 20% of consumer issues research papers by Canadian researchers were deemed to be relevant to public policy, compared with an average of 28% internationally. Canadian researchers appeared to publish more on business issues (60% of their consumer-relevant papers) than researchers internationally (49% of the papers). See the report for notes on the methodology.

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**Figure 3** Specialization in Consumer Issues Research by Country, 1996 – 2007



Source: Reproduced from Archambault et al. 2008.

As we have seen, there are a number of indications that a significant level of Canadian academic CIR exists. However, there are challenges in identifying it across a range of disciplines and publication outlets, and its focus may not be on the public policy issues that are the subject of this Update. This does not imply that the other angles of research are irrelevant – insights from the commercial perspective can also be useful to the making of public policy if they reflect, at least in part, the interests of consumers. A number of other contributions could therefore likely be identified, upon further examination, and would enhance the scope of CIR in Canada.

<sup>40</sup> “Specialization index (SI): The SI is an indicator of research intensity in a given entity (e.g., a country or an institution) for a given research area (e.g., a field or subfield), relative to the intensity in a reference entity (e.g., the world). (...)

SI = (Xs/Xt) / (Ns/Nt), where:

Xs = Papers from entity X in a given research area (e.g., papers by Sweden in CIR);

Xt = Papers from entity X in a reference set of papers (e.g., total eligible papers by Sweden);

Ns = Papers from reference entity N in a given research area (e.g., world papers in CIR);

Nt= Papers from reference entity N in a reference set of papers (e.g., total eligible world papers).” (Archambault et al. 2008)

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## *Part Three: Networking Models Used in Consumer Interest Research*

### *Academic CIR Networking in Canada*

There are no formal research networks in Canada that focus specifically on CIR. However, some networks in CIR-related sub-disciplines are facilitating constructive exchanges with respect to CIR-relevant knowledge.

At the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM), the Groupe de recherche en droit international et comparé de la consommation (GREDICC) has been active since 2003. GREDICC works on the development of a network of experts in the study of consumer laws throughout the Americas. The centre gathers together professors and researchers from UQAM and from other Quebec, Canadian and foreign universities. Its networking activities include the organization of seminars, conferences and training, notably co-organizing a major summer school programme. GREDICC also produces a number of publications, and offers assistance to a number of governmental and community organizations.<sup>41</sup>

The aforementioned Agriculture Policy Research Network's Consumer and Market Demand Network (page 8) is another example of a consumer issue-focussed network for Canadian researchers.

Now in its 42nd year, the Annual Workshop on Commercial and Consumer Law also offers a research networking opportunity for legal scholars across Canada.<sup>42</sup> Founded by Professor Jacob S. Ziegel, (Professor Emeritus at the University of Toronto) the Workshop encourages discussions of new research and disseminates results through the publication of proceedings.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the Canadian Law and Economics Association's annual meetings have often included sessions of relevance for CIR.<sup>44</sup>

From the well-established home economics CIR area, some networking support is provided through the Canadian Home Economics Foundation (CHEF). Its mission includes providing financial assistance for home economics research and supporting post-secondary education related to the home economics profession.<sup>45</sup> For example, CHEF has supported Financial Forum 4, "a conference for academics and professionals with backgrounds in home economics,

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<sup>41</sup> See the GREDICC website at [www.gredicc.uqam.ca/](http://www.gredicc.uqam.ca/).

<sup>42</sup> See the 2012 program on the website of Dalhousie University, the host for the 2012 edition: [http://law.dal.ca/News\\_and\\_Events/Conferences\\_and\\_Seminars/Consumer\\_and\\_Commercial\\_Law\\_Workshop/Program/index.php](http://law.dal.ca/News_and_Events/Conferences_and_Seminars/Consumer_and_Commercial_Law_Workshop/Program/index.php).

<sup>43</sup> See the 2012 Workshop page at [http://law.dal.ca/News\\_and\\_Events/Conferences\\_and\\_Seminars/Consumer\\_and\\_Commercial\\_Law\\_Workshop/index.php](http://law.dal.ca/News_and_Events/Conferences_and_Seminars/Consumer_and_Commercial_Law_Workshop/index.php).

<sup>44</sup> For example, see the 2012 program: [www.canlecon.org/public/conferences/3/schedConfs/3/program-en\\_US.pdf](http://www.canlecon.org/public/conferences/3/schedConfs/3/program-en_US.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> See the Foundation's website at <http://chef-fcef.ca/default.htm>.

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human ecology, family studies or related fields who work with families on financial matters”.<sup>46</sup> CHEF also gives an annual juried best paper award for both undergraduate and graduate level scholarship, many of which have had a consumer focus. The Ontario Home Economics Association also manages some awards and scholarships.<sup>47</sup>

Other organizations across Canada are also offering some networking opportunities where CIR scholars can present their research. For example, in Québec, the aforementioned Fondation Claude Masse has supported four CIR-related conferences since 2003<sup>48</sup>, and in 2009, the Office de la protection du consommateur began its support of a biennial conference on a consumer interest theme, which is organized by consumer groups and includes presentations by a number of CIR scholars.<sup>49</sup>

## *International Networks Involved in Academic CIR*

Various models have been used to provide structure to networks in the academic CIR field, ranging from simple online networks for baseline diffusion of research-related information to formal, structured networks grouped under an institution, with various types of supporting activities (peer-reviewed journal, annual conference, etc.).

Initiated in 2003, the European Consumer Citizenship Network (CCN) was a multidisciplinary network of educators from 123 higher education institutions. Representatives from UNESCO, UNEP and international citizenship and consumer organizations were also included in the CNN. Network participants focused on issues dealing with “the balance between material and non-material wellbeing and how one can translate ethical values into everyday practice through conscientious participation in the market”.<sup>50</sup> The CCN was evaluated as “...an excellent forum for the development of ideas on Consumer Citizenship Education (CCE). (...) [that] encouraged research and development, provided channels for publications, enhanced the status of CCE as an academic discipline...”.<sup>51</sup> The CCN was financially supported between 2003 and 2009, by the EC ERASMUS Academic Networks program. It has evolved into the Partnership for Education

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<sup>46</sup> See the 2012 conference website at <http://financialforum.info/>.

<sup>47</sup> See the Association’s website at [www.ohea.on.ca/index.html](http://www.ohea.on.ca/index.html).

<sup>48</sup> See <http://fondationclaudemasse.org/la-fondation/formation-et-education/> and <http://fondationclaudemasse.org/publication-des-textes-du-colloque-%c2%ab-la-publicite-arme-de-persuasion-massive-les-defis-de-lencadrement-legislatif-%c2%bb/>.

<sup>49</sup> See information on the 2011 conference at [www.opc.gouv.qc.ca/actualite/activite-office/article/le-marche-de-lendettement/](http://www.opc.gouv.qc.ca/actualite/activite-office/article/le-marche-de-lendettement/) (in French).

<sup>50</sup> See the Network’s archived website at [www.hihm.no/concit/](http://www.hihm.no/concit/).

<sup>51</sup> See [www.perlprojects.org/content/download/26100/300026/file/PERL%20NEWSLETTER%20](http://www.perlprojects.org/content/download/26100/300026/file/PERL%20NEWSLETTER%20), page 4

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and Research about Responsible Living (PERL), which has obtained EC funding for its second three-year project plan (2012-2015).<sup>52</sup>

Another EU-funded initiative is the CONsumer Competence Research Training (CONCORT) grant program<sup>53</sup>, a four-year project that commenced in 2011. It aims to train early stage researchers in the new consumer competence perspective. CONCORT partners include three business schools, two universities, and three corporate partners. The initiative seeks to offer “an optimal blend between traditional training methods, innovative learning instruments, and thorough practice training through industrial secondments” recognizing that “Consumer research is scattered across several disciplines in the social sciences with little communication occurring between research and practice”.<sup>54</sup>

Sub-regional networks also exist in Europe, notably the collaboration on consumer-oriented research in Nordic countries. ConriN, a network of consumer researchers in the Nordic countries, has about 320 members.<sup>55</sup> The Network is coordinated by the Centre for Consumer Studies, CFK, an interdisciplinary research centre established in 2001 at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden.<sup>56</sup>

National consumer research networks and institutions also abound in Europe. Norway and Finland each have government-based research institutions devoted to consumer research.<sup>57</sup> Germany recently provided another example for the development of a consumer research network. In November 2011, the German Federal Ministry of Nutrition, Agriculture and Consumer Protection (BMELV) announced a new independent consumer research network. The network’s activities will focus on interdisciplinary scientific research in the interest of consumers, by bringing together “scientists of different disciplines such as sociologists, jurists/attorneys, and economists for joint consumer research activities across disciplinary

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<sup>52</sup> PERL, another initiative supported by the EC, aims to advance education for responsible living by focusing on consumer citizenship, education for sustainable consumption, social innovation and sustainable lifestyles. Its work continues in line with that of the CCN, but has expanded globally in terms of partnerships and has broadened its scope to explicitly include sustainability activities that do not focus on consumption. See the Partnership’s web site at [www.perlprojects.org/](http://www.perlprojects.org/).

<sup>53</sup> See the CONCORT website at [www.econ.kuleuven.be/drc/Marketing/concort](http://www.econ.kuleuven.be/drc/Marketing/concort).

<sup>54</sup> See information on a CONCORT partner page at [www.esmt.org/eng/faculty-research/major-projects/](http://www.esmt.org/eng/faculty-research/major-projects/).

<sup>55</sup> See the Network’s web page at [www.cfk.gu.se/english/conrin/](http://www.cfk.gu.se/english/conrin/), and the database of researchers (ConriD) at <http://www.conrid.cfk.gu.se/>.

<sup>56</sup> See the Centre’s website at the School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg, at <http://www.cfk.gu.se/english/?languageId=100001&contentId=-1&disableRedirect=true&returnUrl=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.cfk.gu.se%2F>.

<sup>57</sup> SIFO, the National Institute for Consumer Research in Norway, is a government institute that is solely concerned with consumer research: [www.sifo.no/page/English/Meny\\_knapper/10237/10281](http://www.sifo.no/page/English/Meny_knapper/10237/10281). Finland’s National Consumer Research Centre is a research institution under the Ministry of Employment and the Economy: [www.kuluttajatutkimuskeskus.fi/en/](http://www.kuluttajatutkimuskeskus.fi/en/).

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boundaries”.<sup>58</sup> A 2004 BMELV working document on consumer policy research had emphasized the importance of networking:

“The networking of science plays an important role in the promotion of research. The representatives of the new research into consumer policy need to form groups of experts which are structurally visible for the new type of consumer policy research in order to have the opportunity of being integrated into existing cooperation programmes funded by national and international sponsors.”  
(Leonhäuser 2004)

European scholars have also developed topic-specific networks. For example, the Competition Law Scholars Forum connects members of university law schools for whom competition law is a significant focus of work. It promotes competition law scholarship, notably through biannual workshops and the publication of a scholarly journal, the *Competition Law Review*.<sup>59</sup> In the field of sociology, the Consumption Research Network has been active in the European Sociological Association since the early 1990s, “and has drawn scholars from across Europe for discussions at the cutting edge of social and cultural debate on consumption”.<sup>60</sup>

Well-established initiatives in the United States include the American Council on Consumer Interests (ACCI), which has been a key CIR-related network since 1953. It is a membership organization for academics and other professionals involved in consumer and family economics. Through its community, the ACCI promotes the consumer interest by encouraging, producing and communicating policy-relevant research. Its activities include an annual multidisciplinary conference and the publication of a well-respected peer-reviewed journal, the *Journal of Consumer Affairs*.<sup>61</sup>

A second example is the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS), another significant source of CIR-related networking activities. Its members include academics and other professionals whose work assists individuals, families, and communities in making informed decisions about their well being, relationships, and resources to achieve optimal quality of life. Its activities include a long-standing annual conference, webinars, and online communities (with tools like discussion boards, wikis, and shared event calendars). The AAFCS is also the society responsible for the publication of the *Family & Consumer Sciences Research Journal*.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See the BMELV information provided in English at [www.bvl.bund.de/EN/091\\_ConsumerProtection/01\\_Tasks/05\\_Consumer\\_Research\\_Network/Consumer\\_Research\\_Network\\_node.html](http://www.bvl.bund.de/EN/091_ConsumerProtection/01_Tasks/05_Consumer_Research_Network/Consumer_Research_Network_node.html).

<sup>59</sup> See the Forum’s website at [www.clasf.org/index.html](http://www.clasf.org/index.html).

<sup>60</sup> See [www.esa-consumption.org](http://www.esa-consumption.org).

<sup>61</sup> See the Council’s website at [www.consumerinterests.org/About\\_Us.html](http://www.consumerinterests.org/About_Us.html).

<sup>62</sup> See the AAFCS website at [www.aafcs.org/](http://www.aafcs.org/).

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Formed in 1999, the Consumer Studies Research Network (CSRN) is another CIR-related network in the U.S. It seeks to foster dialogue and debate among scholars who are interested in, and concerned about, the place of goods and commodities in social life. Its activities include a bi-annual newsletter and an email discussion list to facilitate exchanges on the most recent scholarship in the field of consumption studies. In 2011, CSRN representatives proposed, and were granted, a new section status within the American Sociological Association, on Consumers and Consumption.<sup>63</sup>

The Sustainable Consumption Research and Action Initiative (SCORAI) provides an example of a U.S.-based multidisciplinary network with international affiliates. It is an international network of academics and practitioners whose members “are seeking to facilitate the design of a coherent research program that forges connections between scholars and communities of practice and contributes to an ongoing policy dialogue on these interrelated issues”.<sup>64</sup>

The Canadian academic CIR community has actively engaged with many of these American networks. A number of Canadian CIR researchers are members of these associations, and networking events are sometimes held in Canada.<sup>65</sup> There have also been examples of Canadian representation in the governance structures of some American-based CIR groups.<sup>66</sup>

## Summary

CIR is obviously of great importance in today’s economy, given the impact consumers and consumption activities have on the dynamism of our economic system. Knowledge developed through CIR can have significant impacts from both a policy and economic perspective, as well as at the level of individual’s physical and psychological well-being. The quality of our lives is much defined by our consumption patterns, beginning from birth.

The genesis of this Update lay in Industry Canada’s 2005 research for the *Consumer Trends Report*. Further analysis has highlighted the complexity involved in defining CIR and identifying CIR-related scholars. Through its multidisciplinary nature, CIR has both significant strengths – in the form of the breadth of scholarship that can contribute to research with the consumer interest in mind, and inherent challenges – given the greater difficulties in finding consumer-relevant research undertaken in so many different disciplines. Nevertheless, the

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<sup>63</sup> See the Network’s website at <http://csrn.camden.rutgers.edu/index.htm>.

<sup>64</sup> See the Network’s website at <http://scorai.org/what-we-do/> and its 2013 conference website at [www.confmanager.com/main.cfm?cid=2645](http://www.confmanager.com/main.cfm?cid=2645).

<sup>65</sup> For example, a 2012 Workshop of SCORAI : <http://scorai.org/vancouver-2012/>.

<sup>66</sup> For example, Dr. Robert Kerton, Distinguished Professor Emeritus and Adjunct Professor of Economics at the University of Waterloo, is past President of the American Council on Consumer Interests (2003-04).



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multidisciplinary character of CIR reflects rather well the complexity of consumer policy analysis and policy-making, where many issues cannot be understood solely through single disciplinary lenses, but must instead integrate input from a number of quite different disciplinary perspectives to develop effective policy responses.

As the analysis for this Update has shown there would appear to be significant academic consumer interest research and expertise on-going in Canada. However, relative to other countries the emphasis of that body of research appears to be less focused on public policy issues. Further, there are concerns regarding the declining presence of scholars specifically trained and dedicated to consumer studies in recent years and a decline in the number of programs and academic departments specifically devoted to public interest consumer issues.

While a limited number of Canadian academic CIR-related networking activities have been found, international examples have illustrated enhanced levels of interaction are possible. It could be useful for the CIR community in Canada to further investigate such examples (e.g. through case studies) and benefit from the lessons learned. Discussions have been taking place in Canada among a number of representatives from academic institutions and other stakeholders regarding development of a CIR network. Initial exchanges took place at a SSHRC-supported multidisciplinary workshop held in September 2012.<sup>67</sup> Some initial communication tools are being developed, including a Directory of scholars (see textbox).

## **A new tool to identify academic research experts involved in CIR**

With financial support from Industry Canada, a preliminary version of a Directory of scholars with expertise in Canadian consumer interest research has been developed. The online hosting of the Directory is ensured by the University of Waterloo.<sup>68</sup> The Directory of scholars aims to offer a means for researchers involved in CIR work to self-identify. As the Directory grows, it will provide policy-makers, consumer organizations, and researchers themselves with efficient access to contact information for a range of CIR expertise across many academic institutions.

Industry Canada is looking forward to continuing work with partners in the CIR community to further explore options for CIR networking efforts in Canada.

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<sup>67</sup> The Workshop was organized by Dr. Kerton from the University of Waterloo, Economics Department, and Professor Thierry Bourgoignie from Université du Québec à Montréal, Faculty of Political Science and Law. Proceedings are available at: [www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/oca-bc.nsf/eng/ca02804.html](http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/oca-bc.nsf/eng/ca02804.html).

<sup>68</sup> The Directory will soon be available online at <http://ccird.uwaterloo.ca>.

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