

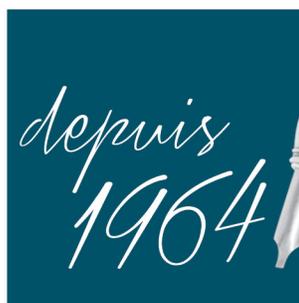
BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF
EDUCATION, HIGHER EDUCATION
AND RESEARCH

Rethinking the Boundaries of College Studies: Between Legacy and Possibility. Thoughts on New College Diplomas Above and Beyond the Technical DEC

SUMMARY

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Conseil supérieur
de l'éducation



This document is a summary of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's brief *Retracer les frontières des formations collégiales : entre l'héritage et les possibles. Réflexions sur de nouveaux diplômes collégiaux d'un niveau supérieur à celui du DEC technique.*

The full brief (in French only) and this English summary are both available on the website of the Conseil at www.cse.gouv.qc.ca.

Overview

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's brief *Retracer les frontières des formations collégiales : entre l'héritage et les possibles. Réflexions sur de nouveaux diplômes collégiaux d'un niveau supérieur à celui du DEC technique* [Rethinking the Boundaries of College Studies: Between Legacy and Possibility – Thoughts on New College Diplomas Above and Beyond the Technical DEC] focuses on technical training in college within the overall structure of the Québec higher education system.

In the brief, the Conseil first examines the pursuit of further studies beyond the technical diploma of college studies (DEC), and how the structure of the higher education system supports the desire expressed by an increasing number of students to combine technical training at the college level and university studies. The Conseil's findings are clear: technical training in college has now become a regular pathway to university, and seen from this perspective, any changes required to meet this need would be part of ongoing improvement in consolidating gains already made.

The Conseil then carefully evaluates proposals advanced for some time now by a number of stakeholders in the college network that would lead to a rethinking of the boundaries of technical training in college. Ultimately, the purpose of the Conseil's work is to inform any further debate on the creation of new diplomas. Aware of the rich history of the Québec higher education system and recognizing the strength of the technical DEC, the Conseil recommends that the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research introduce new diplomas in college studies and create conditions favourable to ensuring their clarity, recognition and implementation.

FIRST FINDING : THE STRUCTURE OF THE QUÉBEC HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IS A KEY STRENGTH IN THE PURSUIT OF COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY STUDIES

As part of its work, the Conseil first carried out a comparative analysis of the pursuit of further studies beyond a college diploma. Ontario and British Columbia provided contrasting examples of the types of training offered in their colleges as well as the terms and conditions for transferring from college to university, enabling the Conseil to put the structure of Québec's own higher education system into perspective.

The Conseil noted the extent to which the structure of the Québec system increases the opportunities to pursue further studies related to technical training in college. In this regard, the results of its analysis reveal that the role traditionally assigned to college education has unequivocally contributed to the development of a simple, open and unique higher education system.

Unlike Ontario and British Columbia, Québec did not have to create a governmental agency responsible for facilitating the transfer from college to university. In fact, a 2012 Québec survey¹ revealed that 27% of graduates from technical programs went on to pursue university studies.

1. *La relance au collégial en formation technique – 2012* [Relance Survey of College Graduates Technical Training – 2012].

This is significant, as it shows that Québec universities are admitting graduates with technical diplomas at a much higher rate than their counterparts in Ontario, and comparable with those in British Columbia. These numbers, however, cannot be explained by the structure of the higher education system alone; they are also the result of measures implemented voluntarily by Québec institutions. DEC-BAC agreements between colleges and universities have unquestionably played a role in boosting these rates, even though data collected in Québec do not capture the motivations behind students' choice of academic path.

Consolidating gains made in articulating college and university studies

Although technical training in college has become a popular pathway to university admission, without adequate coordination and funding, some of the gains made over the past few years in articulating studies between the two levels are at risk. Changes made in the following areas, as part of ongoing improvement, could be undertaken to strengthen these gains:

- Universities should rally around shared principles of recognizing the transfer of credits in technical studies in colleges.
- The Québec higher education system does not have a common terminology for issues related to the transfer of credits in the area of articulation agreements. It would be in the best interest of students that colleges and universities agree on such a terminology.
- Without funding for DEC-BAC agreements, the Conseil fears that any progress made in this area could be eroded over time, given that maintaining current agreements alone already requires ongoing coordination between institutions.
- Tracking student pathways to university in technical training programs seems imperative. Currently, this appears to be lacking, and may jeopardize the ability to adjust the system in light of these pathways.
- The quality of information on DEC-BACS made available to students could be improved, notably on institution websites.

For the Conseil, it is the responsibility of the Minister to take a leadership role and coordinate action on the part of college and university networks in these areas. This leadership extends beyond the current mandate of the *Comité de liaison de l'enseignement supérieur*. In fact, without significantly overhauling its function, this committee could hardly be called upon to be the prospective authority to support articulating college and university studies on an ongoing basis.

SECOND FINDING : INTRODUCING NEW COLLEGE DIPLOMAS AND ENSURING THEIR CONSISTENCY WITH THE STRUCTURE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM IS DESIRABLE

For over 15 years now, a number of proposals have been put forth by stakeholders in the college network to rethink the “format” of the DEC. Together with requests from some professional associations to review requirements for initial training in their professions, these proposals reflect the new expectations for technical training in college.

In the brief, the Conseil evaluated four such proposals:

- 1- To offer, at the college level, programs of specialization in addition to initial training;
- 2- To offer programs longer than three years leading to an advanced technical DEC;
- 3- To offer, jointly with universities, integrated programs leading to a university degree;
- 4- To offer, at the college level, applied degree programs.

The Conseil concluded from its analysis that the DEC alone cannot meet the demand for every type of college training. While in its current format the DEC can satisfy most expectations of the labour market, the Conseil recommends that new diplomas be created to broaden the offer.

The quality of technical programs in college and their recognition by the labour market and universities are well known. Indeed, in their sphere of responsibility, colleges have more than proven their ability. Neither is the Conseil advocating that existing technical programs be called into question. However, the expertise of the college network should not be limited to a single diploma—the DEC—without which this expertise would not exist. In addition to the current technical DEC, other pathways are also possible, which can be integrated into the structure of the higher education system.

The Conseil's recommendation is about allowing colleges to offer training programs that go beyond the current technical DEC, each meeting its own specific objectives, certified by an appropriate diploma, and opening the door to more diversified pathways for students. Consequently, these diplomas could provide the college network with differentiated solutions where an offer of technical training above and beyond the current DEC is called for.

Creating a new diploma of specialized college studies

The notion of offering a diploma of specialization at the college level is not entirely new. A Specialization Diploma in Technical Studies (DSET) was introduced in the *College Education Regulations* in 2008, yet to date no plans for this type of program have received Ministerial approval. In the brief the Conseil examines some of the challenges associated with its implementation.

Firstly, it appears the place of this diploma within the offer of programs in Québec higher education has been a source of confusion. As it is presently designed, the DSET:

- Can be comparable to the fourth year of a technical DEC;
- Has not been deemed a satisfactory solution by professional associations;
- Overlaps with the purpose of the Attestation of College Studies (AEC) of specialization;
- Is seen as likely duplicating the function of a university certificate.

Moreover, the Ministère de l'Éducation, de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Recherche has imposed conditions on the DSET that are difficult to meet. Programs leading to a DSET 1) need to comply with the same requirements as a DEC, without being comparable to the latter; 2) have to be sequential to a DEC and yet be at the same level; 3) have to be linked to acute and clearly-

expressed employment needs that have not yet been met by existing programs. Given these demanding conditions, the Ministère has yet to approve any plans for this diploma.

However, the college network is currently offering programs leading to an AEC of specialization. For the Conseil this poses a problem: the AEC thus certifies learning at specialized level, while in most cases this diploma is meant to attest to initial training with lower requirements than those of a DEC.² Programs leading to an AEC of specialization reflect the respected expertise of colleges and the demand for this type of program. However, it appears to the Conseil that specialization programs at this level could be further developed and more widely recognized if they were certified by an appropriate diploma. By contrast, Ontario's experience with college post-diploma certificates reveals the ability on the part of colleges to develop niche programs that meet student demand for specialized training that facilitates entry to and/or advancement in a profession. The Conseil thus supports maintaining a diploma of specialization at the college level, yet giving it a renewed status. For this reason, it recommends creating a new diploma of specialized college studies (DCES) that would replace the DSET and the AEC of specialization.

For this proposed diploma to be a success, a new education philosophy needs to guide its creation. First, the objective of college specialization itself needs to be broadened. The type of specialization envisioned by the Conseil could, for example, take the form of:

- State-of-the-art specialization for holders of a technical DEC;
- Specialization in the field of applied research, a niche for some colleges;
- Specialization for graduates from related fields for whom it is not a direct continuation of a previous program;
- Specialization in applied management for a given professional field.

In advocating for the DCES, the Conseil is moving away from a narrow vision of specialization centered entirely on the demand for the expert training of specific technical DECs, and it believes it is important to underscore this change in objective through the nomenclature of the diploma.

Second, it is important to firmly settle on the level of training required for a DCES compared to that for existing diplomas: the DEC, the baccalaureate and the certificate.

Third, as a diploma attesting to specialization and not initial training, the DCES could address emerging occupations that are often unevenly distributed throughout Québec. The DCES would make it easier to offer programs fine-tuned to locally-expressed needs, and would be a welcome addition to the comprehensive training offered by a technical DEC. College-level institutions must therefore be allowed some degree of autonomy in developing if not approving programs and certification.

It is the thinking of the Conseil that the DCES should be viewed as a vector for innovations in college studies and as a means of diversifying possible paths in higher education.

2. The lack of a general education component, for example.

Creating an advanced technical DEC attesting to higher standards

The *College Education Regulations* sets the maximum number of credits allowed in a technical DEC. Neither the Ministère nor colleges can add any other competencies, periods of instruction or learning activities beyond this limit.

In recent years, there have been many calls to raise this limit. Advocates claim this would allow existing technical training to be adjusted by adding competencies that presently cannot be accommodated within the curriculum. Moving college studies in this direction certainly appears simple enough to implement. Lengthening the DEC, moreover, would also keep regular college education to a single diploma.

Yet while it is true that a three-year technical DEC can barely accommodate any more credits than stipulated by the *College Education Regulations*, the Conseil feels that merely adding more credits would not in and of itself justify extending the duration of the program an extra year. Why should a program of 97½ credits take four years to complete while a program of 91½ credits is currently completed in three? At what point should the decision be made to change a three-year program into a four-year one—and based on what criteria? Would there not be a risk of overloading three-year programs if a simple increase in the maximum number of credits were allowed? Would the option of adding credits to a current DEC program not open the door to piecemeal additions?

Moreover, an extended DEC would in essence certify extended training without truly attesting to any tangible enhancements having taken place. Ultimately, the desire to increase the number of credits in a program is indicative of increasing expectations in training requirements. For the Conseil, the right response lies not in simply adding more credits to a program, but reviewing its requirements as well.

For these reasons, the Conseil calls for the creation of an advanced technical DEC rather than raising the ceiling on the current number of credits in the existing DEC.

In its comparative analysis, the Conseil noted that colleges in Ontario offer a two-year diploma and an three-year advanced diploma side by side, each with distinct levels of requirements, a distinction recognized, moreover, by the labour market through resulting job descriptions and pay structures.

Creating an advanced technical DEC in Québec would first entail determining the level of requirements associated with it. Clearly formalizing these—no small task—would facilitate positioning the advanced technical DEC in the offer of post-secondary diplomas, in between the current DEC, the baccalaureate and a possible diploma of specialized college studies (DCES). The specific objectives of this diploma would thus be firmly settled.

The advanced technical DEC could be considered for programs where the three-year initial training has been deemed insufficient and in need of enhancement, but not to the level of a baccalaureate. However, the Conseil cautions the education community against evaluating in a vacuum the relevance of programs that an advanced technical DEC could certify. The labour market must also participate in this process.

Fostering the creation of a college-university collaborative baccalaureate

In Québec, institutions at both college and university levels have developed strong partnerships in articulating their respective programs. In the technical sector, for the most part this collaboration takes the form of DEC-BAC agreements. In general, these agreements uphold the autonomy of both institutions, which are individually responsible for the training programs leading to their own diplomas.

While these agreements have been successful in recent years, the Chantier sur l'offre de formation collégiale has recommended a type of joint program that, in the Conseil's interpretation, calls for even closer cooperation between partner institutions in its development and management.³

The Conseil defines the collaborative baccalaureate as a program of studies that involves—to varying degrees—the development in partnership of a curriculum as well as joint responsibilities in the areas of admission, instruction, learning, infrastructure, student support and evaluation. The program would lead first to an intermediate college diploma and then to a final university bachelor's degree, and would be subject to a cyclical review process in which both parties would participate.

Thus a college-university collaborative baccalaureate would not be, strictly speaking, a new diploma, but rather a new type of program designed and jointly offered by a college and a university according to agreed-upon terms and conditions. Unlike the existing DEC-BAC agreement, this would be an integrated (as opposed to cumulative) program of study, with a curriculum developed by both partners leveraging the strength of each.

In principle, a collaborative baccalaureate would not presume the role each partner plays: theoretically, either could take part in the program at any point. However, given the existing structure of higher education, it would be more logical to have students admitted to the college portion of the program first and then to university. This sequential format would retain college as a prerequisite to university admission. An intermediate diploma—comparable to a pre-university DEC in terms of requirements—would be awarded after two years. Students who at some point may have changed their career goals could thus realign their academic path and still attend university. In essence, this diploma would be even more narrowly focused than a pre-university DEC, but not prepare students to directly enter the labour market, as with a technical DEC. In short, this is about creating a new type of pre-university program with a more targeted objective whose end goal of university is clearly signposted, one where students, as of college, can start a program of study more aligned with their academic plans.

It goes without saying that such a baccalaureate would require establishing a partnership satisfactory to both institutions, and in this area, Ontario's experience shows that satisfaction is not to be taken for granted. In this relationship of balance, the contribution of colleges to the

3. The *Rapport final du Chantier sur l'offre de formation collégiale* recommends an applied baccalaureate jointly offered by a college and university as a way to overcome some of the challenges related to the format of the DEC. This report does not specify the terms and conditions of this applied baccalaureate. For its part, the Conseil has studied the feasibility of a college-university collaborative diploma that would not lead to joint certification, but rather to a university degree jointly offered by colleges and universities.

various aspects of developing and managing the program must be clearly defined, including the degree of respective autonomy and general requirements pertaining to their segment of the path.

The college-university collaborative baccalaureate takes its inspiration from the proven success of DEC-BAC agreements, without seeking to replace them. DEC-BACs remain the preferred choice where a qualifying technical DEC exists, for this pathway allows a student to obtain two diplomas recognized by the labour market. However, in the absence of a qualifying technical DEC, the collaborative baccalaureate could represent a new way for colleges to contribute to higher education by drawing on the expertise they have developed. This baccalaureate could be useful in cases where a profession is raising its entry standards from a technical DEC to a baccalaureate following an evaluation process whose conclusions are widely shared. The Conseil believes that this type of program could open the door to new paths in higher education, and that it is the responsibility of both colleges and universities to target the programs for which these baccalaureates would compliment the existing offer in a meaningful way.

Continuing the work on an applied baccalaureate in college studies

The Conseil also examined the feasibility of introducing an applied baccalaureate in Québec. An initial training program with a minimal duration of five years, this degree would be offered entirely by colleges, and possibly certified by them.

Encouraged by the experience in Ontario, the *Fédération des cégeps* and the *Regroupement des collèges du Montréal métropolitain* over the years called for Québec colleges to play an active role in the offer of baccalaureates. More recently, the *Chantier sur l'offre de formation collégiale* also referred to the applied baccalaureates offered by Ontario colleges in its final report, and outside Ontario, other higher education systems as well have accredited their college-level institutions to confer degrees.⁴

Indeed, since the 1990s, there has been a rise in the number of Canadian and American institutions authorized to offer degree programs. In several education systems, this right—hitherto granted to universities—has been broadened to include colleges, an expansion that has resulted in the major challenge of these new baccalaureates being recognized by students, the labour market and universities. This has resulted in a need to formalize requirements to ensure new applied baccalaureates adhere to the same standards university degrees.

Ontario colleges have been able to offer applied degrees⁵ as far back as 2000, when they were first legislated this power. The process that enables them to do so is tightly regulated and subject to rigorous standards. The legal wherewithal to offer applied degrees is accompanied by the implementation of a substantive regulatory framework that ensures quality and recognition. The fundamental requirements of the applied degree programs were aligned with university undergraduate degrees, yet embodied the applied nature of the training with the addition of specific parameters. Through these different obligations, Ontario colleges were prompted to develop programs of a more complex nature than previously offered.

4. In Québec, these are the bachelor's, the master's and the doctorate. The Conseil's brief focuses solely on the bachelor's degree.

5. According to sources consulted by the Conseil, an applied degree program in Ontario colleges can be termed a "college degree," "applied degree," "applied baccalaureate," "college baccalaureate," "applied program," or "applied studies leading to a degree." In all cases, these are university-level undergraduate degrees.

The changes brought about by the introduction of applied baccalaureates in Ontario, however, did not significantly shake the foundation of the system. The internal logic of the higher education structure was preserved, as college programs are not a prerequisite to university. The major change consisted in establishing the conditions of equivalency between college and university degrees, primarily in admission criteria for programs leading to a college degree, and the requirements with which the colleges had to comply, with the ultimate goal being to ensure public recognition of the degree.

Moreover, in Ontario the applied baccalaureate was created in a demographic context markedly different than that of Québec, that is, one driven by a strong demand for degree programs primarily in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Indeed, applied baccalaureates are almost exclusively concentrated in the GTA and are not offered throughout Ontario, either because their funding is below the cost involved, because it is difficult to recruit duly certified educators, or simply because of low enrolment in outlying regions.

Unlike Ontario, introducing an applied baccalaureate by colleges in Québec would present considerable challenges inherent to the internal logic of its higher education system. The added value, viability and recognition of this diploma in the current offer of higher education are also not immediately apparent.

Lastly, the Conseil is aware of far-reaching consequences when colleges invest in a field that had hitherto been the purview of universities. Traditionally the baccalaureate has represented the boundary between the two levels of instruction, and allowing colleges to offer applied baccalaureates, if not the authority to confer degree themselves, would signify a major evolution of their mission. Indeed, offering baccalaureates at the college level would significantly alter the role colleges have been historically been called upon to play in Québec higher education.

For these reasons, the Conseil invites both colleges and universities to continue dialogue on the introduction of this diploma with rigour and an open mind.

THIRD FINDING : CREATING NEW DIPLOMAS REQUIRES ENSURING THEIR CLARITY, RECOGNITION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Through the brief the Conseil calls for the creation of new diplomas and, ultimately, new paths in higher education. However, introducing these diplomas through legislation alone is not sufficient to guarantee their viability nor their recognition. These will require both a renewed dialogue on technical training in college and extensive collective effort from all stakeholders in the college network. In essence, this means having the indispensable commitment, the hearts and minds of all involved, as well as establishing conditions favourable to ensuring the clarity, recognition and implementation of these new diplomas.

Formalizing the different levels of training in post-secondary education

The Conseil recommends creating a diploma of specialized college studies (DCES), an advanced technical DEC and a collaborative college-university baccalaureate. Introducing these three diplomas at the same time would entail clearly outlining the requirements of the programs through a reference framework that includes every diploma offered in post-secondary education,

a framework that would make it easy to compare and contrast post-secondary diplomas as well as promote their clarity. This large-scale undertaking would need to engage the different levels of instruction from vocational training in secondary schools to university.

In its approach and its results, this diploma reference framework would define the vision, differences and coherence of the Québec post-secondary education system, making it, in the opinion of the Conseil, a cornerstone of a new diploma architecture.

Fostering dialogue between the world of education and the world of work

The creation of new diplomas should be built on a sustained and constructive dialogue between all stake holders from both the education community and the labour market. The latter must be able to express training needs pertaining to a profession's entry-level qualifications, needs which the former is then tasked with translating into training requirements. These new diplomas must also be accompanied by analyses of the increasing complexification of tasks in some professions to determine the level of training required to adequately perform these tasks. The Conseil is well aware that relations between certain professional associations and the education community can at times be strained, and hopes that the creation of these new diplomas would provide a welcome opportunity for renewed dialogue.

Reviewing the division of responsibilities between colleges and the Ministère

The Conseil also believes that the creation of these diplomas needs to be accompanied by greater autonomy for institutions at the college level. Indeed, these institutions are perhaps best positioned to determine how the new diplomas could be incorporated into the offer of programs. To this end, colleges must have the necessary manoeuvring room to develop programs that could prove to be foundational for the entire network. Naturally, students must be assured the equivalent level of training regardless of their choice of institution; the Conseil stands firm in this regard. Nonetheless, a new division of responsibilities between colleges and the Ministère must be planned for alongside the creation of any of these new diplomas.

Ensuring the resources and means necessary for the development of colleges

Lastly, the Conseil would like to reiterate that creating any new diplomas will always require the necessary resources and means. Even more than these investments, their introduction is dependent on being open to new education pathways emerging in innovative institutions within the Québec higher education system, a creative undertaking that is as imaginative as it is forward-looking. The Conseil hopes its own analysis and recommendations can lead the way.
