

**CONSEIL
SUPÉRIEUR
DE L'ÉDUCATION**

**Successes, issues
and challenges for university
education in Québec**

Summary

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In its brief *Les réussites, les enjeux et les défis en matière de formation universitaire au Québec* (Successes, issues and challenges for university education in Québec), the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation draws a portrait of university education, so as to gain an overall picture of its aims and the factors that may hamper their achievement. This portrait is divided into five aspects: University education in Québec (Chapter 1); Educational paths (Chapter 2); University education frameworks (Chapter 3); Links between education and employment (Chapter 4); and University as a place for culture, knowledge and self-fulfilment (Chapter 5).

By providing the contours of the current situation, the Conseil hopes its brief will serve as a springboard for additional reflection and action on the issues and challenges raised.

Chapter 1

University education in Québec

The first chapter presents an overview of university education in Québec. Access to university studies, and how this affects the level of education among the general population, is a priority in Québec, and more particularly for the Conseil, which has repeatedly supported raising education levels by encouraging access to the highest levels of education for all those who have the ability and desire, whether at the undergraduate, graduate or post-graduate level (CSE, 2008¹, 2010²).

For the Conseil, it goes without saying that the portrait of higher education in Québec would not be complete without the data from college education, which constitutes an effective means of access to university studies, especially through its pre-university programs. The Conseil observes that the university graduation rate of the Québec population has been rising continually over the last few decades. In this regard, it notes that while Québec compares favourably to Ontario and the rest of Canada at the doctoral level, increased efforts are required at the bachelor's level and, to a lesser extent, the master's level. For this reason, the Conseil proposes that efforts be maintained and intensified to **promote the value of pursuing university studies (Recommendation 1)**.

Despite the progress mentioned, the Conseil believes that the democratisation of university education remains an unfinished project. It points out that several student groups or populations are still subject to various kinds of disparities. These include, among others, gender disparities, affecting both men and women, albeit in different ways; disparities in success depending on program type and organization; disparities in access and success for students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds; and difficulties specific to first-generation students, students with special needs, Indigenous students, and international students. While all these groups face issues and challenges that are specific to their situation, their growing presence leads to challenges for universities, which must adapt accordingly and provide the necessary support services. Thus, careful to not lose sight of the various inequalities that could obfuscate a

1 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2008). *Des acquis à préserver et des défis à relever pour les universités québécoises*, Québec, Le Conseil, 94 p.

2 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2010). *Pour une vision actualisée des formations universitaires aux cycles supérieurs*, Québec, Le Conseil, 128 p.

relatively positive general portrait of university education in Québec, the Conseil recommends that a working group be set up to **study the disparities in university access, representation and graduation among different student populations, including disparities related to program type and organization, with the goal of setting up measures to facilitate access for all students (Recommendation 2).**

Considerable regional disparities also caught the Conseil's attention, particularly between major urban centres and outlying regions. While it notes that universities appear willing and able to offer their programs across the Québec territory, the Conseil nonetheless deems that development of the education offer should be based on an evaluation of the needs of populations, taking into account the specific needs and realities of the different regions. To this effect, the Conseil reaffirms the important role that all regions play in the economic, social and cultural development of Québec society, as expressed in its report on the state and needs of education 2006-2008 (CSE, 2009³). That is why the Conseil is putting forth the recommendation to **study the development of the university education offer across the territory of Québec as a whole (Recommendation 3).**

3 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2009). *L'éducation en région éloignée : une responsabilité collective*, Rapport sur l'état et les besoins de l'éducation 2006-2008, Québec, Le Conseil, 123 p.

Chapter 2

Educational paths

Beginning in secondary school, the Québec education system has several “orientation stages” where students are required to make choices that will then influence and, in some cases, limit the options available to them at subsequent levels of education. The Conseil notes that certain measures have been put in place to foster the retention or return of students at various stages along their educational or professional path. These include DEC-BAC agreements reached between college and university institutions, as well as mechanisms put in place in universities to recognize prior learning. To encourage more students to continue their studies, the Conseil recommends that measures be taken to **foster the flexibility of educational paths (Recommendation 4)**.

Beyond specific measures, the regular rules of admission to universities also have an impact on students’ choice of university education program and, consequently, their choice of career. Admission to a university may be more or less restrictive depending on the program of study and, for a similar program, it can vary from one institution to another. The Conseil raises certain issues surrounding the rules of admission, such as the importance of combining several means of selection in the program admission process, or the dangers inherent in restricting access to certain programs based on imperatives tied to the potential for professional placement. In order to take into consideration the necessary admission quotas for certain programs while demonstrating an equally necessary flexibility, the Conseil invites universities to **carefully review program admission criteria (Recommendation 5)**.

Furthermore, the Conseil notes that guidance services are invaluable tools for exploring, clarifying and validating education and career choices. Although Québec universities do offer such services, the Conseil has observed that students and graduates do not always make use of them. Parallel to the needs in the area of guidance services, greater support for disseminating information about the labour market is a request that has been made repeatedly by experts and observers, including the Conseil itself in previous briefs. The Conseil insists, however, that the fundamental underlying principle for educational and professional orientation should be first and foremost the aspirations and interests of the person. Thus, the Conseil recommends that stakeholders maintain and **enhance information, guidance and counselling services offered by university institutions (Recommendation 6)**.

Chapter 3

University education frameworks

Québec universities are active in developing their education programs and demonstrate a concern for ensuring their quality and relevance. Although program content is specific to each institution, there are nonetheless a number of generic attitudes and competencies that transcend the borders of disciplines and institutions, and that serve as frameworks of reference. The Conseil was able to identify several frameworks of competencies to be developed among students, intended for either all programs of study or specific to certain programs. Whether they were developed universally, such as those of the Association des doyennes et des doyens des études supérieures au Québec (ADESAQ) and the Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire (BCI), or by institution, these frameworks are, in the eyes of the Conseil, potential tools for valorizing university studies in that they provide the Québec university system with the means to ensure consistency across program offerings and to guide their quality and relevance. However, given the lack of knowledge of these frameworks among students, teachers and, to some degree, employers, the Conseil believes it is important to **make existing competency frameworks known (Recommendation 7)**.

The Québec university system is also equipped with mechanisms to evaluate the quality of its education programs, when they are created or on a periodic and continual basis for existing programs (CSE, 2010⁴, 2012⁵). Although evaluation of these programs is up to each institution, there are some general guidelines and Québec-wide mechanisms involving players at the different levels, that is, the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES), the BCI, universities and, in some cases, accrediting bodies and professional orders.

From the outset, the Conseil acknowledges the positive contribution of such mechanisms to the quality and relevance of programs of study; however, it points out certain issues, such as the length of time it takes to evaluate new programs or, from an organizational perspective, the void left by the fact that the BCI's Commission de vérification de l'évaluation des programmes, which has the

4 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2010). *Pour une vision actualisée des formations universitaires aux cycles supérieurs*, Québec, Le Conseil, 128 p.

5 Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2012). *L'assurance qualité à l'enseignement universitaire : une conception à promouvoir et à mettre en œuvre*, Québec, Le Conseil, 123 p.

mandate to examine the mechanisms put in place by institutions, has been inactive for several years. As stated in its brief in 2012, the Conseil deems “that the credibility of any evaluation process depends on its rigour and transparency, on the autonomy and expertise of the body responsible, and on the impartiality and diversity of its members.” (p. 78 [Translation]) For this reason, the Conseil puts forth the recommendation, as it did in 2012, to **consolidate external evaluation practices within one independent body responsible for evaluating university programs (Recommendation 8)**.

The Conseil also examined the influence exerted by professional orders on programs of study, whether relating to accreditation requirements or the development of competencies expected in professionals. While recognizing that relations between professional orders and universities are generally harmonious, the Conseil would like to **remind the actors concerned of their respective roles and responsibilities with regard to university programs leading to regulated occupations (Recommendation 9)**. The Conseil would also like to **encourage the active involvement of university representatives within professional orders and accrediting bodies in order to express their concerns and share the specific experiences of university programs leading to regulated occupations (Recommendation 10)**.

Chapter 4

Links between education and employment

The training aspect of the mission of universities can be looked at from the perspective of preparing students for professional life. The growing trend to integrate practical training (internships) into university programs, in an increasingly greater variety of disciplines and at all levels of university education, enables students to acquire experience in the workplace and with the public.

The Conseil acknowledges the extensive benefits of such activities. At the same time, it observes that internships are often a sensitive topic for the parties concerned, for example, for students facing the challenge of balancing their studies, work and family; for students with special needs; or for the universities, who must mobilize resources to ensure optimal internship conditions. The Conseil also notes considerable variations in how internships are managed and the conditions under which they are carried out. It finds that some of the guidelines in certain fields pose serious risks, particularly with respect to accessibility, equity and quality. While recognizing some promising initiatives, such as the one spearheaded by the MEES to develop a guide for educational institutions to improve the student intern experience, the Conseil recommends that a number of actions be taken to **improve internship conditions (Recommendation 11)**. In a similar vein, the Conseil emphasizes that it is imperative to **recognize and promote the value of supervision in internship placements (Recommendation 12)**.

Based on the available data, the Conseil finds that, overall, university graduates are perceived as competent, notably with respect to literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills, and in technological environments. However, to ensure the transferability of students' skills, the Conseil deems it pertinent to examine the competencies acquired by graduates, particularly doctoral graduates, so as to render them visible to employers and, in this way, highlight their relevance to

the performance of professional activities. The Conseil reiterates that it is in the interest of society to support the education of doctoral students, who play an active role in advancing knowledge and culture. More specifically, it recommends measures to **integrate and enhance skill transfer activities in doctoral programs (Recommendation 13)**.

Moreover, given the deficiency in data, the Conseil stresses the importance for Québec to equip itself with better instruments for monitoring the outcomes of university graduates. To this effect, it recommends that a process be put in place to **conduct a Québec longitudinal study on graduate outcomes (Recommendation 14)**.

Chapter 5

University as a place of culture, knowledge and self-fulfilment

The Conseil believes it is essential to consider students' educational paths within a larger perspective, by awarding a greater importance to the development of general competencies and the personal general culture that is required for successful, effective and productive integration not only into the workforce, but also as a citizen, in a society that wishes to meet the demands of a 21st century civilization.

The Conseil recognizes that when students are exposed to disciplines outside their own, it nurtures their general culture, helps them understand the limits of their own specialty, and fosters their capacity to work in an interprofessional context. The Conseil is of the opinion that interdisciplinary programs are necessary to meet many of society's needs, including those of the labour market, while maintaining that discipline-specific training is still important. For these reasons, the Conseil recommends that universities and departments **foster opening up disciplinary programs (Recommendation 15)**.

Moreover, given the constraints that universities or departments often face in implementing interdisciplinary programs, the Conseil deplors the lack of data on the conditions and impacts of such programs. It therefore underscores the need to **take stock of interdisciplinarity in university programs (Recommendation 16)**.

In terms of the various disciplines present in the education offer, the Conseil regrets the absence of recent and detailed data on the current situation in the Québec university system. Nonetheless, the Conseil sees a "fragilization" of some teaching and research fields, while noting that the disappearance of certain disciplinary programs does not necessarily mean the discipline itself has disappeared from within programs. However, in the Conseil's opinion, this fragilization constitutes a threat to the capacity of university studies to contribute

to students' general culture, both for students in these fields and for others who may have access to them as well. Given these observations, the Conseil deems it fundamental to **preserve knowledge and research fields, particularly in the humanities and basic sciences, where programs are seeing a decline in enrolment (Recommendation 17).**

As it has already done for master's and doctoral graduates in particular (CSE, 2010), the Conseil recognizes university graduates' contribution to Québec society, beyond just their professional occupation. The individual and collective benefits of higher education are numerous and diverse, from a lower crime rate to a longer life expectancy, and include a greater satisfaction in life and better health, while contributing to students' personal fulfilment. It is notably to support this mission of university that the Conseil urges, as its final recommendation, that policies and practices **recognize and support the social and collective purpose of university studies (Recommendation 18).**

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