

CONSEIL
SUPÉRIEUR
DE L'ÉDUCATION

Accelerated Pathways In University Studies In Québec

Summary

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Québec 

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Concerned about issues such as equity, system-wide coherence and the value of university degrees in the practices of accelerating university studies in Québec, on December 5, 2019 the Québec Minister of Education and Higher Education requested the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE) document these practices in a brief and make recommendations. To fulfill this mandate, the Conseil conducted a literature review of available statistical data and consulted with organizations representing stakeholders in the academic community. The present summary of the Conseil's brief *Cheminements rapides dans les études universitaires au Québec* [Accelerated Pathways in University Studies in Québec] is divided into three sections: a contextual outline of the issue under examination, an overview of concerns raised during the consultations, and recommendations to the Minister of Higher Education and the academic community.

1 Context

Definitions

The Conseil first outlined the milestones in the different university degrees in Québec to define the expectations for each. In recent years, substantial efforts have been mounted to this end (Association des doyens des études supérieures au Québec [ADESAQ], 2018; Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire [BCI], 2019; Conseil des ministres de l'Éducation (Canada), 2007; CSE, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2019), and these expectations have been gradually clarified, with the same competencies required for obtaining an undergraduate degree also being a requirement for admission to a graduate program.

There are, however, other pathways which allow students to advance faster from one university degree to the next. The Conseil specifically examined three such accelerated pathways for its brief: integrated, fast-track and direct entry (see Table 1).

Table 1

Types of Accelerated Pathways¹

Integrated pathway	Option for bachelor's candidates to enrol in master's courses or for master's candidates to enrol in doctoral courses.
Fast-Track pathway	Option for master's candidates to be admitted to a doctoral degree program without having had to complete a thesis.
Direct Entry pathway	Option for bachelor's candidates to be admitted directly to a doctoral program.

1 Nuances in honours programs, joint programs offered in some faculties of Medicine, and features specific to Psychology programs are discussed in greater detail in the Brief.

Accelerated Pathways in University Regulations

In reviewing the academic regulations of Québec universities, the Conseil noted that while no university offered all three accelerated pathways, all included guidelines—in varying degrees of detail—on at least one. The majority of these regulations make provisions for a “way out” of a doctoral program depending on the pathway (fast-track or direct entry) by referencing terms for withdrawing from the program and continuing a master’s or obtaining a master’s degree subject to certain conditions.

The integrated pathway was the least common pathway found in academic regulations. In terms of eligibility to the fast-track pathway, some universities demand that magisterial coursework be completed before allowing this type of transfer to a doctoral program, others require that candidates obtain a minimum number of credits or complete a given percentage of the program (two-thirds). As for direct entry, most regulations specify eligibility criteria such as an excellent academic record, scientific publication or acquisition of specialized knowledge (with or without prior verification).

A Statistical Snapshot of Accelerated Pathways

The Conseil drew on two sources to create a statistical snapshot of accelerated pathways: Admission data from the BCI, for identifying Québec-wide trends on direct entry pathways², and data provided by four institutions (McGill University, Université de Montréal, Université Laval and the Université du Québec network), used to illustrate realities at the local level for the integrated and fast-track pathways³.

Direct Entry Pathways

Between 2010 and 2019, BCI data show an uptick in the number of direct entries from a bachelor’s to a doctorate in programs of studies and in Québec universities. This increase was higher in the English-speaking university network and in engineering schools. In addition, the social and demographic profile of students enrolled in a doctoral program via direct entry tended to differ from the rest of the doctoral population. The vast majority of these students came from universities from outside the Québec and Canadian

- 2 The BCI database did not include a separate indicator for the direct entry pathway. The Conseil was nevertheless able to create one that allowed it to gauge the extent of these accelerated pathways in Québec academic institutions. Included in this indicator were students who applied or enrolled in a doctoral program using their bachelor’s degree to support their application. This definition presents some limitations, and the results from it could potentially skew higher than actual figures.
- 3 Given that the data on these two types of pathway were neither systematically nor uniformly collected by universities, it was not possible to fully capture a system-wide snapshot.

university system. Men also tended to outnumber women in this student cohort. Lastly, students enrolled in direct entry pathways were more likely to be younger than the rest of those in doctoral programs.

Integrated and Fast-Track Pathways

The various data collected showed an increase in the number of accelerated pathways from master's to doctoral programs in the four participating institutions (McGill University, Université de Montréal, Université Laval and the Université du Québec network), particularly in the applied science and engineering faculties. Data from these institutions show that the average time needed to graduate from a combined master's and doctoral program was shorter for students who pursue their doctoral degree via an accelerated pathway compared to those admitted in a regular one. Doctoral graduation rates were also higher among students who had accelerated to a doctoral program. Lastly, although accessible, the integrated option did not appear to be very popular, yet there is also a paucity of data on it in Québec universities.

2 Concerns Raised During Consultations

The Conseil then consulted with a number of experts and organizations in the academic community⁴. The concerns voiced during these consultations were grouped under two broad twin categories: systemic and institutional, and pedagogical and individual.

Systemic and Institutional Concerns

The definition and perceived value of degrees

The issue of the perceived value of each higher education degree was raised on numerous occasions over the course of the consultations, with the relevance of the distinct and gradual three-step itinerary from bachelor's to master's to doctorate mentioned. Some of those consulted feared that if accelerated pathways were to become common practice, this could lead to the master's degree being seen as obsolete; others believed the master's should instead be valued more. For many, any considerations of the value given to different degrees should form the basis for a substantive conversation that would include other external factors and trends impacting the academic community (e.g. labour market trends, public funding for university education, demographic shifts, the growing number of professional graduate programs).

4 The organizations consulted were the BCI's New Program Evaluation Commission; the BCI's Academic Affairs Committee; the ADÉSAQ; the Quebec Student Union; the Intersectorial Student Committee of the Fonds de recherche du Québec; the Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université. The experts consulted were Alexandre Beaupré-Lavallée from Université de Montréal and Christian Bégin from Université du Québec à Montréal.

Recruitment, retention and institutional funding

Student recruitment and retention was often given as a reason for Québec universities offering accelerated pathways. It was suggested that recruitment and retention strategies may be linked to the dynamics of inter-university competition at the Québec, Canada or international levels. In this case, offering accelerated pathways becomes a useful lever for institutions to retain their best and the brightest students (retention) and attract those from other Québec or institutions abroad (recruitment).

Differences by field of study and institution

During the consultations, many thought that the practice of accelerated pathways was more common in engineering and the natural sciences than in the humanities and social sciences, an assumption that was confirmed by the data collected by the Conseil. It was clear from the discussions that there is a pressing need for institutions to establish a regulatory framework that would help strike a balance between the need to set guidelines and respect the differences and traditions of the disciplines. Many of those consulted suggested that the judgement of research directors—central to any decision whether or not to offer a student the option of an accelerated pathway—should be at the core of these guidelines. In these differences, the consultations made it evident that policy at the ministerial level may not enable the specificities of institutions implementing accelerated pathways—based on size, fields of study, and student population—to be captured.

Pedagogical and Individual Concerns

Student preparation and supervision

Discussions that took place during the consultations revealed a major concern regarding adequate preparation of students in pursuing graduate studies. Many of those met by the Conseil stressed the importance of supervision of students in accelerated pathways, to better support successful completion of a student's education plan, reduce the risk of withdrawal, or prevent mental health problems. To support direct entry from a bachelor's degree to a doctoral program, some brought up the honours program often offered in American, English and Australian (and in some Québec) universities. These programs give students the opportunity to gain experience in research as of their undergraduate years.

At the same time, a number of those consulted also stressed that pedagogically speaking, accelerated pathways are not to be underestimated, as they offer several significant advantages, particularly for those students showing an early inclination for research, who are already thinking of pursuing doctoral studies and have a clear idea of research interests for their thesis.

Student mental health

Another recurring concern raised by those consulted was the potential for accelerated pathways to be a source of stress for many students. Although these kinds of challenges are not limited to those in accelerated pathways, many pointed to the additional strains inherent to transiting a special pathway, and that for these students, effectively “moving out” from their original group may exacerbate feelings of isolation. In this sense, to contribute to good student mental health, the option of backtracking is vital to reducing any potential pressure or stress.

As we stated previously, and noted by some, the supervision of research directors is nothing short of critical here, particularly at a time when more human-focused support may need to be provided.

Funding studies

Some of those consulted worried that students transiting accelerated pathways could be negatively impacted in a number of ways when applying for financial support. Indeed, it was noted that in the evaluation of grant applications, the number of previous grants received, scientific presentations, and published articles, among others, are all given careful consideration and weighed against the aspirations of the individual. Some feared that it might be difficult to assess the potential of a student who has not completed a master’s program and may not have had an opportunity to participate in research nor be published. The Conseil’s analysis revealed that provincial and federal granting agencies take this aspect into account.

Graduation rates and the duration of studies

The consultations highlighted that, on the one hand, accelerated pathways had advantages to students in terms of the duration of studies, which data collected by the Conseil actually confirms: higher graduation rates and lower tuition costs, for example.

On the other, it was pointed out that it is not uncommon for school administrators to apply pressure on faculty to reduce the duration of studies for students under their supervision, and that this added pressure to graduate faster is then transferred down to the students without any consideration of the workload required. Additionally, many decried the current gap between the expected (and funded) and actual duration of graduate studies, both in master's and doctoral programs.

Lastly, many also raised the fact that research training, learning and development in a discipline is a lengthy process, one that gives the mind and critical thinking time to mature. In this sense, for some, the master's degree, provided it is not excessively burdened by additional requirements, represents an essential step to maturity.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes of its literature review and the consultations held with stakeholders in the academic community, the Conseil has formulated eight recommendations:

Recommendations on Accelerated Pathways in Québec Universities		
1	Guiding Principles for Accelerated Pathways	<p>That Québec universities and the Minister of Higher Education mandate the management and development of accelerated pathways be subject to the following guiding principles:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure quality graduate training, with all accelerated pathways—direct entry in particular—subject to clearly-defined criteria; • Prioritize student success in all accelerated pathways—direct entry in particular—with stringent evaluation at admission, close and ongoing pedagogical and human-focused guidance throughout programs, and a mechanism for a dignified way out for those who do not continue their studies until graduation; • Respect the value of all university degrees and competencies to be acquired in each; • Respect institutional autonomy in the aforementioned principles and the recommendations that follow.
2	Standardization of Terminology and Statistical Data	<p>That Québec universities, together and with support from the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, take all the necessary steps to wherever possible standardize terminology and statistical data on accelerated pathways in graduate programs of study;</p> <p>That all universities promptly establish—and subsequently update and publish on a regular basis—data comparing the success rates of those admitted to doctoral programs without first having completed a master's degree to those who do.</p>
3	Evaluation of Applications for Direct Entry to Doctoral Research Programs	<p>That Québec universities continue to ensure that all applications for direct entry to doctoral research programs be rigorously assessed against accurate and well-documented academic records, so as to select the individuals most likely to succeed in the chosen program, in light of prior academic work or work in fields deemed relevant;</p> <p>That universities compare and share the most up-to-date knowledge to benefit from best practices in this area.</p>
4	Duration of Research Master's Programs	<p>That research master's programs can be effectively completed within a two-year timeframe (a standard time period often stated on university documents), and as such, that the requirements of these programs be truly commensurate with the objectives of a master's degree, particularly acquiring high-level research competencies;</p> <p>That universities ensure research directors as well as students are informed of options for an accelerated pathway to a doctoral program.</p>
5	Support for Students in Graduate Studies	<p>That Québec universities continue, through suitable means, to upgrade supervision and mental health support for students in master's or doctoral research programs;</p> <p>That universities continue to develop and offer their faculty members training sessions on best practices in supervision and mental health support for students enrolled in graduate studies, particularly those transiting accelerated pathways.</p>

Recommendations on Accelerated Pathways in Québec Universities		
6	Honours Programs	That Québec universities be encouraged, where no such programs exist, to develop training at the undergraduate level modeled on Anglo-Saxon honours programs, such as the honours bachelor, by providing the best possible preparation for research and direct entry to a doctoral research program.
7	Fast-Track Pathway from a Master's to a Doctoral Program	<p>That the Minister of Higher Education welcomes the practice that allows students to transfer from a master's to a doctoral program (hence the fast-track pathway);</p> <p>That individuals with an incomplete master's enrolled in a doctoral program via an accelerated pathway be allowed, should they request it, to instead complete their master's thesis or undertake other work of comparable nature required by the program;</p> <p>That conditions for backtracking to the original master's program be clearly defined and stated in the initial admission offer.</p>
8	Direct Entry From a Bachelor's Degree to a Doctoral Program	<p>That the Minister of Higher Education welcome the development of direct entry pathways from a bachelor's degree to a doctoral program in Québec universities that choose to develop this training option, provided the following conditions are met:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Universities implement quality assurance mechanisms for these types of training; 2. Admission to direct entry be reserved for those candidates whose applications were subjected to a rigorous review process (as specified in Recommendation 3); 3. Direct entry from a bachelor's degree to a doctoral program be feasible in principle in every discipline and field of study, with the agreement of the relevant academic units overseeing these disciplines and fields, as well as the university bodies responsible for approving programs of study; 4. Universities that offer such options ensure students have developed the same competencies upon completion from their program, regardless of whether they have taken a direct entry or a regular pathway; 5. All individuals admitted to a doctoral program directly from a bachelor's degree have the right to backtrack and complete a master's without penalty, should their personal circumstances, future plans or fields of interest lead them to this decision. Universities must clearly define the conditions for such entry and communicate them at the time of admission to the program, both to students and to supervising faculty; 6. The experience and expertise of supervising faculty be taken into consideration when approving supervision of students admitted to a doctoral program directly following a bachelor's degree. 7. Given the growing number of programs that allow direct entry from a bachelor's degree to a doctoral program, the Minister of Higher Education, in partnership with other relevant Québec Government ministries, must ensure that individuals who complete doctoral programs without first completing a master's program be recognized and processed, in terms of job classification and pay grade, as if they had duly completed a master's degree before pursuing their doctoral studies.

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