

CONSEIL
SUPÉRIEUR
DE L'ÉDUCATION

College education

Educational experience and new realities

Summary

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Québec 

What learning is required today to develop as an individual and to participate in today's and tomorrow's society?

How can the education system optimize the development of these essential skills?

What is the potential for evolution in the organization of education in order to optimize its relevance with respect to current realities and to meet the needs of learners?

In the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's brief entitled *College education. Educational experience and new realities*, the Conseil puts forward possible answers to these questions, which have been driving recent reflections on the future of higher education, and of education in general (OCDE, 2018, 2019a; UNESCO, 2015, 2020). While recognizing the systemic nature of this issue, the Conseil proposes to lay the groundwork for a forward-looking vision of college education in order to inspire change.

The Conseil focuses on the training of students enrolled in regular education leading to a DCS (DEC); it also pays attention to the elements of training that are outside the field of specialization. Its reflection has been enriched by student perspectives gathered through the consultation process.

Factors of change to consider

Changes in the profile and pathway of the college student population, as well as societal trends in Canada and around the world, are putting pressure on education and training programs and prompting action.

Student profile and paths

The increasing diversity of the student population poses challenges to understanding, in a fair and informed way, the factors that influence student pathways and overall success. It is becoming increasingly difficult to draw conclusions about the characteristics and pathways common to the entire student population. The Conseil calls for a reconsideration of the idea that there is a "typical student" and a standard pathway to success. An upward trend in the average age, an increase in the proportion of adults aged 25 and over, and an upswing in the proportion of students who are not Canadian citizens all illustrate the changing characteristics of the student population as well as the growing cultural diversity within colleges. This diversification is also reflected in a variety of student expectations, needs, and educational goals.

In terms of educational pathways, the phenomenon of students studying beyond their expected length of study is recognized in the college community, as is the stagnation of the graduation rate at approximately 63% two years after the expected length of study. The Conseil notes that hasty conclusions are often drawn about student success in college, and therefore about the effectiveness of the college system. It believes that making decisions about success based primarily on standard indicators is a simplistic view

of reality and promotes the idea of a standard pathway as the norm. This is why the Conseil reaffirms its positions on the need for an inclusive vision of success from a student success perspective that goes beyond the boundaries of schooling and that also truly takes into account the non-immutable nature of scholastic normality (CSE, 1995). While recognizing that collective efforts are still needed to promote student success, **the Conseil calls for nuance in the discourse that accompanies the analysis of college pathways and for a repositioning of representations of college success** to reflect the diverse reality of current student pathways more accurately. The Conseil believes that greater value and consideration must be given to the array of pathways that ultimately lead to success and reiterates the importance of the guidance function of colleges in supporting students' career choices.

Societal trends affecting education

Among the major movements taking shape in today's society, the Conseil has identified some that, in its view, call for reflection on the role of education today and in the future, including the meteoric rise of digital technologies; climate change; globalization under stress; the reshaping of citizen and democratic participation; the transformation of the world of work; the rise of risk, uncertainty, and threats; demographic changes; and the evolution of cultural reference points. The Conseil calls for an acknowledgment of the resonance of these trends in the context of Québec college education. It notes that these transformations influence the content or nature of programs of study and the competencies to be mastered by graduates, and that some of them also affect the way the education system carries out its functions or provides its training. The education system must adjust to these changes, but also influences them through the training it offers to individual students. Therefore, students are in symbiosis with this changing society. They embody and propel the transformations as much as they must adapt to them by adopting new behaviours.

Anticipated training needs

Educational institutions have a responsibility to define relevant training to develop individuals who can influence these trends and become agents of change to meet the complex challenges of the current century. They are called to prepare individuals to participate fully in society so that these stakeholders can in turn achieve their educational goals. The last two decades have seen the emergence of a global movement calling for "a new model" of learning for the 21st century based on questions such as "What education do we need for the 21st century? What are the purposes of education in the current context of societal transformation? How should learning be organized?" (UNESCO, 2015, English version, p. 3). What are the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by individuals today to succeed in life and participate in building the world of tomorrow, and how can education systems support the acquisition of these skills? (OECD, 2018, our translation). The Conseil questions the essential elements of an education that is adapted to the needs of the present and the future in terms of the purpose of education and essential learning.

Expanded training objectives

Among the many initiatives underway in various countries to define the guidelines for a renewed education or a pedagogy adapted to the anticipated needs of the future, the Conseil notes that a broader formulation of the purpose of education is emerging, with a **particular emphasis on a humanistic vision** that embraces, among other things, dimensions related to the realization of people's potential and capacity to act, individual and collective well-being, the harmonious relationship of human beings with the planet, the goals of sustainable development, and lifelong learning.

This humanistic vision tends to foster “the acquisition of relevant knowledge and the development of competencies in the service of our common humanity ... [and] takes the debate on education beyond its utilitarian role in economic development” (UNESCO, 2015, English version, p. 37). It invites us to think of learning in “an open and flexible” perspective and as a process “that is both lifelong and life-wide: an approach that provides the opportunity for all to realize their potential for a sustainable future and a life of dignity” (UNESCO, 2015, English version, p. 10). This process embraces all aspects of life, since it takes place not only formally, in schools and higher education, but also non-formally and informally, at home, in the community, and in the workplace (OECD, 2019b, p. 4, our translation).

21st century skills

To succeed in the workplace and in modern societies, soft or cross-cutting skills are among the new skill sets that individuals must master (OECD, 2019b). The numerous frameworks for 21st century competencies published by international organizations or specific countries in recent years demonstrate an international interest in this area. Although there is no real consensus on the vocabulary used to designate 21st century competencies, a consensus is emerging on the importance of fostering their development.

Some of the competencies relevant to the future of education (UNESCO, 2020) are reminiscent of skills, abilities, and knowledge already identified in previous work on 21st century competencies, while others appear to be new and stem more from the necessity to respond to pressing needs at the dawn of the 2020s as a result of major trends such as climate change, globalization, and the digital society. Among these, the Conseil identifies digital skills, citizenship and eco-citizenship, intercultural skills related to living together, critical thinking, complex problem solving, creativity, communication, media literacy, teamwork and collaboration, and human and social skills. The key challenge is to ensure that these competencies are effectively integrated into teaching and learning, but not as add-ons that can overload the programs of study. The Conseil advocates the formal integration of these competencies into programs of study and **invites concerted reflection on the definition of a comprehensive exit profile for college students.**

General culture and interdisciplinarity

General knowledge and interdisciplinary knowledge are also considered essential elements for education in the context of our present and future society.

In a digital society, one of the fundamental roles of educational institutions, as social institutions, is to preserve access to education for all, including access to culture and knowledge. The Conseil considers it essential that education lead to the development of a **solid general culture** with the objective of access to knowledge, but also of educating enlightened and open citizens who are called upon to solve complex problems that require the mobilization of vast knowledge. The Conseil considers that general culture is not limited to an accumulation of knowledge in distinct domains, but that it is the interconnection of these domains and the perspective that general culture gives to knowledge that provides its full richness. At the college level, the Conseil believes that culture is inherent in the foundation of the disciplines in addition to being the hallmark of general education. While recognizing the essential contribution of general education, **the Conseil therefore tends to favour a contribution by all disciplines to the development of this culture** from the perspective of a program approach and the shared responsibility of all components of the programs of study.

General knowledge is also seen as a foundation to support the development of so-called 21st century skills. In addition to this solid knowledge base, individuals need tools to interpret, manage, and connect knowledge. According to Singer, “it is first necessary to establish links between the elements of knowledge forming a ‘raw material’ [...], developed in separate disciplines, in order to access the relevant (interdisciplinary) knowledge needed to identify and solve problems” (2020, p. 218, our translation). The call for interconnections between knowledge and its use in solving complex problems is therefore also linked to a need for **interdisciplinary** training. While some advocate a radical transformation of educational systems to achieve this, the Conseil takes a more nuanced and gradualist approach. Without breaking down the disciplinary structures that prevail in the organization of education, **the Conseil calls for an openness to decompartmentalization so as to introduce and experiment with interdisciplinary learning opportunities that allow individuals to develop complex thinking.** The multidimensional problems that people will have to address in the future transcend disciplinary boundaries, and the education system must be “imbued with multidisciplinary thinking and study to solve global problems” (Jain, 2020, p. 32, our translation).

Flexibility in training: a potential to be optimized

The Conseil sheds light on the concept of flexibility in training and learning and on the practices associated with it in higher education with a view to identifying the adjustments that could be made in this regard at the college level. It believes that the interest in flexibility in training goes beyond the fad that can be attributed to it and is part of a societal movement marked, among other things, by the diversity of the expectations and needs of the student population, by the synergies between the multiple learning sites, and by the rapid evolution of digital technology. In addition, at a time of “unprecedented disruption” in economies caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the anticipated lasting impacts (The International Commission on the Futures of Education, English version, p.3), educational institutions need to be supported in this direction and structured through collaboration to identify flexible options for future training.

In considering this notion, the Conseil notes that flexibility can be operationalized through approaches at different levels of intervention: a targeted approach at the course level, an organizational approach at the program level, and a comprehensive approach that integrates the various dimensions of flexibility.

TARGETED APPROACH (COURSE)	ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH (PROGRAM OF STUDY)	COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moment • Content • Admission requirements • Pedagogical approaches • Delivery mode • Assessment of learning • Resources and support • Learning objective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Study plan • Pace of study • Combined learning • Collaborations with other learning sites • Program of study • Administrative procedures 	Empower students by offering them choices about <i>how, what, when, and where</i> they learn.

Source: The Conseil inspired by the Higher Education Academy (2015), by Paquelin (2017a, 2017b), Unger and Zaussinger (2018) and Li and Wong (2018).

At the college level, the Conseil believes that the introduction of flexibility does not involve a complete break with the current education model. Rather, it advocates a gradualist approach that integrates different flexibility options for learners, while ensuring that they are guided and supported in making decisions about the choices available to them. While flexibility has many advantages, particularly in terms of better adapting to the realities and needs of students and providing pathways to higher education for those who are employed (Martin, 2020), there are still many challenges to be overcome in order to ensure its introduction, including the level of autonomy required for students to have a say in important decisions regarding their learning process; the lack of information and guidance for students regarding the multiple study options available; the overload that flexibility places on institutions to manage all the options available; the lack of guidance on practices associated with flexible learning; and the limiting vision of flexibility associated with the use of technology.

Nevertheless, the movement toward flexibility is already underway, and the Conseil proposes that future actions go beyond the idea of simple adaptation and reactivity to external pressures. Rather, it would like to see a proactive and creative approach to anticipating the adjustments that need to be made to the education process to ensure that it is in line with the needs expressed in today's society and the realities of learners.

Student perspective¹

The three components of the student consultation address training objectives, learning deemed essential, and interest in flexible education and training. The results show a strong need for the development of broad 21st century skills related to the understanding of societal issues, as well as a more nuanced interest in educational flexibility options.

«An education that promotes the development of the individual through self-reliance by encouraging each person to undertake projects and adopt a healthy life balance.»

The most important **educational goals identified** by the students surveyed, among those offered to them, were diploma and qualification related: *getting a diploma, improving my skills to get a better job, and acquiring specialized knowledge in a field.* The next most important comprised personal development and career orientation: *developing myself as a person and my potential and finding my career path.*

With respect to the **competencies deemed necessary**, the students consulted felt in general that it was important to develop the competencies presented to them. Hence, they are sensitive to dominant societal movements and want the training to prepare them to understand and deal with these major trends: mental health issues in the population, social inequalities, climate change and sustainable development, and the cultural diversity of populations. In order to play an active and responsible role in society and the world of work, they also express a greater need for the development of 21st century skills related to autonomy, critical thinking, openness to intercultural differences, and communication. Among the basic skills, they prioritize the development of second language skills.

«[...] allow for the acquisition of general knowledge that is paramount to the development of civic responsibility and citizenship education while also enabling the development of critical thinking, good interaction skills, living together, and teamwork.»

«Provide intense courses and offer diverse complementary activities for the students' all-round development, including non-academic skills such as communication, time management and investing.»

With regard to **educational flexibility**, the results show that a large majority of respondents prefer to organize their educational pathway according to the terms and conditions generally in effect, whether concerning course schedules, school calendar, pace of their training, or learning sites and methods. However, more than half of the survey participants were interested in learning sites and teaching methods that take advantage of professional environments (internships, work-based learning, co-op learning, etc.). Also, about half of the respondents

showed interest in blended learning, while distance learning, whether synchronous or asynchronous, received less interest.

¹ Details on the consultation process, the sample of respondents, and the survey results are provided in the documents included with this position paper.

«A flexible, student-oriented learning experience with combination learning (in-class and synchronous).»

Approximately one-third or more of respondents also expressed interest in flexible pathways with respect to the following options: *doing a part-time summer session in my program; taking intensive courses during the session and extending the length of my training beyond the expected time frame; and choosing an accelerated or intensive pathway.*

In addition, more than half of the respondents showed a strong interest in flexible options for the organization of training content, including *taking more complementary courses for my program-specific training; customizing my training program to my interests and aspirations (without enrolling in a specific program); having complementary courses available for all general education disciplines; and taking courses on themes and issues that involve multiple disciplines.*

“Training that allows you to explore other programs to see if the program you end up in is the one that really suits you.”

«I'd like to choose how long I want to take to complete my program and to break up my classes over multiple sessions in a more personalized way.»

There were differences in interest in certain flexibility options depending on the training sector. Finally, the particular context related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the educational conditions that prevailed at the time the questionnaire was submitted to students call for caution in interpreting the results.

Elements of the administrative and regulatory framework in a state of flux

While the Conseil recognizes the gains in coherence that have been made, particularly through the introduction of the program approach, it notes that programs of study have become increasingly rigid and standardized over time, reducing the scope for student choice. Specialization profiles and pathways allow students to pursue an education more suited to their preferences and are of particular interest to those with a more specific career choice. However, the area of exploration and the possibilities are limited for students in the process of defining their education project. The Conseil wishes to reiterate the importance of the guidance function of college education.

Thus, the broad and open training of individuals, as reflected in the aim of the program, common competencies of College Education, and overall program of study goals, would benefit from being more systematically addressed in teaching and learning. For example, linking common competencies to objectives and standards across the programs would help to stimulate their development, which is currently based on educational intentions alone. The same applies to the strengthening of general culture and interdisciplinarity, which should be supported by the systematic integration of objectives in the programs of study and by taking advantage of the program approach.

In addition, the Conseil proposes to enhance the college training model with flexibility options for learners and to build on collaborations with different learning sites and among the colleges themselves. As long as the obligations set out in the *College Education Regulations* (CER, RREC in french) are respected, the colleges have some latitude for local adaptations with respect to pedagogy. Taking into account the guidelines set out in the collective agreements for teaching staff, the colleges also have some flexibility in arranging the academic calendar and course schedules and in defining the terms of training. **The Conseil encourages colleges to use these areas of flexibility to address the varied and changing realities of the student population.** In this regard, the Conseil believes that certain administrative and regulatory

provisions regarding the organization of studies pose obstacles to the smooth flow of students in a perspective of student success. This is the case, for example, with the date set for dropping courses without penalty, the framework for the type of school attendance, and the management of complementary course offerings.

Colleges looking for the essentials of a forward-looking education

The Conseil notes that opportunities to enhance the student experience outside the formal program of study framework and initiatives that take advantage of diverse learning venues are being implemented by institutions at the organizational level or in collaborations between colleges. Recognition of student involvement; an entrepreneurship support network; a network of homework assistance and science awareness centres; bilingual pathways; virtual classrooms for the entire CEGEP student population; the institution's commitment to the community; closer ties with the scientific research community; and enriched study programs – these are just a few examples of initiatives taken by the colleges within the guidelines defined by the regulatory framework and which illustrate the dynamism of the college network in its concerted efforts to meet current and future training needs. The Conseil encourages this synergy between institutions in order to offer flexible education options and to optimize the rollout of training, and it maintains that financial support from the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur would be likely to stimulate practices in this regard. The Conseil believes that increased networking between colleges and the sharing of expertise are key elements of the future vision for dynamic training, with diversified opportunities adapted to student realities.

The colleges' strategic plans also reflect how these institutions intend to respond to various perceived changes in their environment and identify the key concerns that drive and orient their actions in the short and medium term. The Conseil's analysis shows that the colleges are proactive in several areas that must be taken into account in designing present and future training and that they are alert to the major societal trends that influence training. They also demonstrate a willingness to support the development of 21st century skills and to strengthen the program of study approach as well as general education. The Conseil believes that the colleges are aware of the essential elements of forward-looking education, although their strategic plans only tentatively reflect a commitment to educational flexibility. However, this sensitivity does not guarantee that intentions will be translated into action. Beyond the obvious intentions, questions remain about how to respond concretely to the new needs within the current college structure. For this reason, systemic action at the management or departmental leadership level would be required to support these institutional intentions.

Guidelines and recommendations

Guideline 1:	Update representations of student pathways and college success
RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS	RECOMMENDATIONS
Minister of Higher Education	1. Value and endorse a vision of student success that goes beyond the concept of academic success within a prescribed time frame and that takes into account the phenomenon of longer periods of study, by considering various and complementary indicators to assess the situation of success at the college level in support of decision-making.
Minister of Higher Education	2. Ensure sufficient availability of professional resources in the colleges and strengthen their role in order to offer sustained support to students in the definition and success of their education project.
Minister of Higher Education	3. Review the regulatory framework in order to allow part-time studies in regular education without requiring additional tuition fees and by reconsidering all the conditions associated with this study status.
Minister of Higher Education	4. Extend the deadline for course withdrawal set by administrative agreements, while ensuring that students are supported in the successful completion of their education project.
Minister of Higher Education	5. Support the transfer of research knowledge to the community in order to encourage its reinvestment in practice, particularly in the areas of student success, student conditions, and student pathways.
Minister of Higher Education and the colleges	6. Examine departmental provisions and organizational practices that contribute to the lengthening of student pathways and identify barriers that could be removed to promote greater fluidity of pathways, particularly with respect to compliance with specific admission requirements, course sequences, and prerequisites.
Universities	7. Diversify the conditions of admission to programs of study in order to value and recognize, beyond academic results and in a perspective of student success, the competencies acquired outside the formal framework of these programs, whether through student or civic engagement.

Guideline 2		Meet the needs of society and individuals through relevant and sustainable learning
RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS	RECOMMENDATIONS	
Minister of Higher Education	8. Set up a working committee to define an overall exit profile for college students that includes the shared competencies deemed essential, to clarify the contribution of the various training components to the development of these competencies, and to ensure that the student population appropriates this exit profile and that it is implemented by college staff.	
Minister of Higher Education	9. Review ministerial program of study development and review processes to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Match the updated common competencies with objectives and standards that ensure their teaching and assessment. • Strengthen the integration of elements of general culture in the objectives and standards of programs of study, in addition to the objectives of general education. • Facilitate the integration of interdisciplinary skills into programs of study to build bridges between disciplines. • Build flexibility into the writing of program of study competencies so that colleges can reflect a changing world. • Ensure that programs are part of a true lifelong learning perspective, i.e., that they include continuing education and lifelong learning objectives. 	
Minister of Higher Education and the colleges	10. Ensure the training and development of teaching staff and provide financial support , in a lifelong learning perspective, for the development of skills adapted to new training needs, to promote the mastery of common competencies and the acquisition of a general culture among students, as well as for the implementation of interdisciplinary learning activities.	
Colleges	11. Promote consultation and mobilization around the integration of common competencies , the enrichment of general culture , and the practice of interdisciplinarity in the programs of study, for example during the evaluation and updating of programs.	
Guideline 3		Increase options for training flexibility at different levels of intervention
RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS	RECOMMENDATIONS	
Minister of Higher Education	12. Provide financial support to colleges for the integration of flexibility options into their programs of study with a view to student success and the diversity of student pathways.	
Minister of Higher Education	13. Review the guidelines for complementary general education in order to broaden the range and number of complementary courses offered to students beyond the current six areas of study, for example by taking advantage of program-specific courses and by increasing the space given to interdisciplinary thematic courses.	
Colleges	14. Implement program of study flexibility options across institutions and increase collaboration among institutions to define a range of such options.	
Colleges	15. Support teaching staff in the appropriation and application of pedagogical methods related to flexible learning.	

Guideline 4	Optimize the rollout of college training
RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS	RECOMMENDATIONS
Minister of Higher Education	16. Support collaborations between colleges and workplaces for the development of competencies in authentic situations, both at the technical and pre-university levels, and put in place the conditions for workplaces to participate effectively in competency development.
Minister of Higher Education	17. Authorize and support the college system in developing mechanisms for the recognition of acquired competencies , so as to expand the possibilities for such recognition to regular education, for example, through complementary general education, particularly for students coming from secondary schools, and so as to recognize the competencies acquired through extracurricular activities.
Minister of Higher Education	18. Support the implementation of new initiatives in the college network aimed at synergy between colleges and between these institutions and vocational training centres and universities in order to optimize the rollout of college training and the continuity of student pathways.
Guideline 5	Guide and support students in the development of the autonomy necessary to take responsibility for the definition and success of their education project
RELEVANT STAKEHOLDERS	RECOMMENDATIONS
College students	19. Assume full responsibility for the success of their education project, in particular by becoming informed about the possibilities of their pathway; by making use of resources to support their progress and success; by getting involved in extracurricular activities inside or outside the college; and by engaging in a learning process with a view to academic success.
College communities	20. Broaden students' decision-making about scholastic plans and make them aware of the effects of their decisions on their own journey, on the educational institution and, more broadly, on the education system and on society.
College communities	21. Ensure that all those involved with students assume the shared responsibility of informing and supporting them in the definition and success of their education project, with the aim of enabling them to become autonomous in their studies and to make informed decisions about the options available to them throughout their lives.
Minister of Education and Minister of Higher Education	22. Support and encourage initiatives to intensify collaboration between secondary and college educational institutions with a view to guiding and supporting students in the development of their autonomy with respect to their education project and increasing their awareness of higher education, for example, by reinforcing the content of academic and vocational guidance in connection with the post-secondary education project.

Conclusion²

With the publication of this brief, the Conseil wishes to stimulate a broad and forward-looking reflection and to lay the groundwork for a promising vision of college education. The accelerated and profound transformations of society and the changing realities of students prompt us to take an interest in the training required to ensure that individuals develop the skills needed to participate in today's and tomorrow's society, and to imagine new ways for educational institutions to organize and offer training. Rethinking the educational experience at the college level and ensuring that it takes shape through innovative actions are collective responsibilities. They cannot be based on isolated initiatives alone; they require the mobilization of all the players involved, as well as systemic interventions to offer a relevant, rich, and stimulating educational experience.

- 2 At the conclusion of its work, the Conseil reviewed the Action Plan for Success in Higher Education 2021-2026, published by the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur in September 2021 (Québec, 2021). The Conseil notes that the ministerial action plan includes measures that are in line with a number of the recommendations made in this position paper. It supports the willingness of ministerial authorities to act on shared concerns and invites the Minister to draw inspiration from the Conseil's position paper for the implementation of the measures in the Action Plan.

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