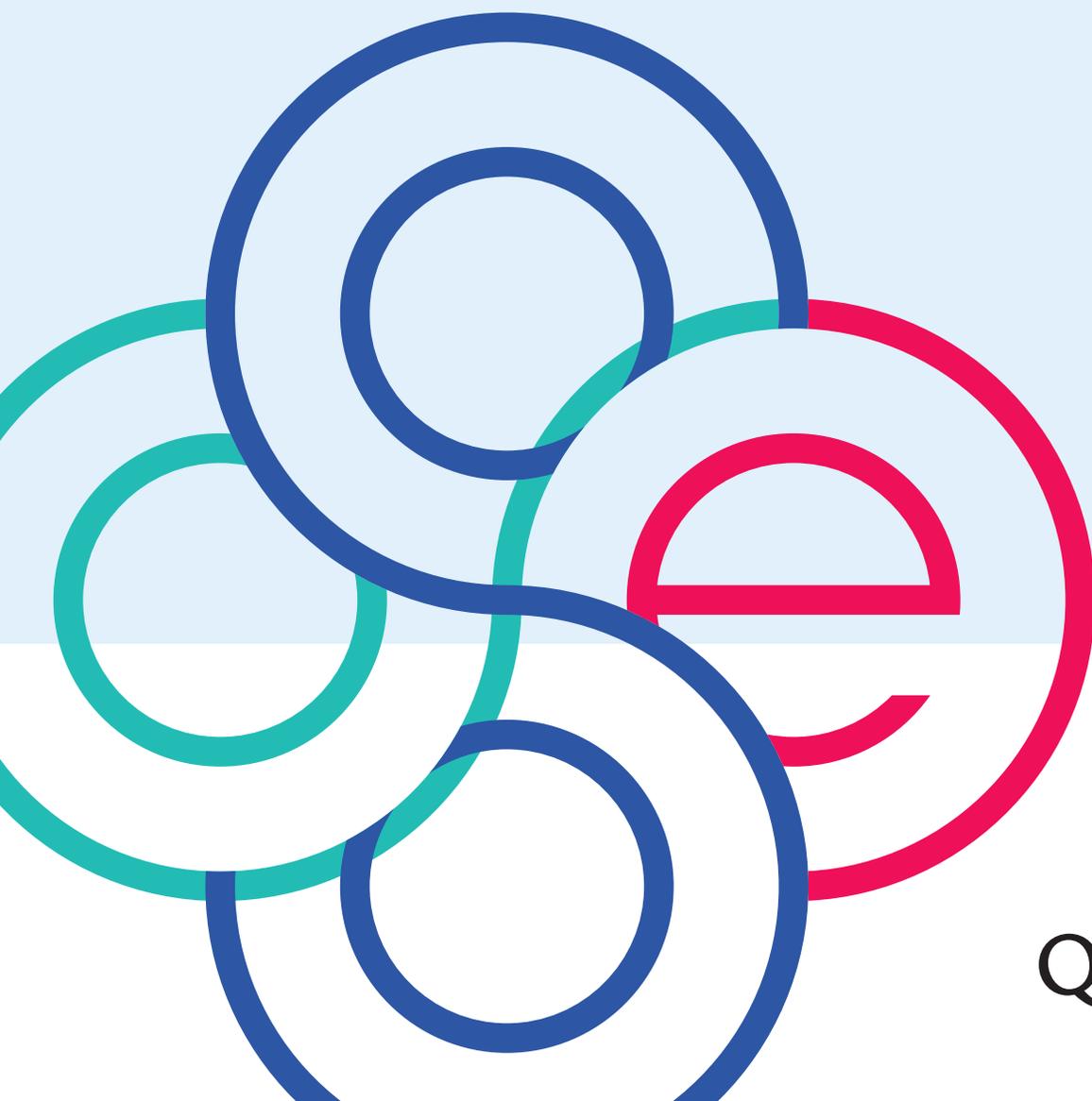


Recognition of acquired
competencies at the college level
**An avenue to be optimized and
promoted**

Summary

June 2022



In the brief *Recognition of acquired competencies at the college level: An avenue to be optimized and promoted*, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE) is responding to a request made by the Minister of Higher Education on December 10, 2021. Concerned about the labour shortage in certain key sectors of the economy, the Minister invited the Council to examine the potential of the recognition of acquired competencies (RAC) to contribute to the qualification and requalification of individuals.

In carrying out this work, the Council broadened its reflection to include the status of RAC at the college level and the main issues at stake, so as to propose avenues of development that will allow the RAC process to continue to grow and to optimize its deployment in the years to come, in both the medium and long term. The Council also believes that it is important to consider RAC from an emancipatory perspective that fosters personal development, in order to keep individuals engaged in the workforce and provide them with opportunities for professional development.

After briefly setting the context for RAC at the college level, this summary presents a synthesis of the issues brought to light by the Council's work as well as its recommendations to the actors concerned.

Setting the context

In Québec, RAC underwent an important phase of development starting in the 2000s, notably following the Council's pivotal brief on the issue for all levels and sectors of education (CSE, 2000), which led to the adoption of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (Québec, 2002).

The ministerial frameworks for RAC at the college level are based on the principles and corollaries articulated by the Council in this brief published in 2000. These principles and corollaries postulate that knowledge and competencies acquired in and outside of school deserve to be recognized insofar as individuals can provide evidence that they possess them. They stipulate that, consequently, the activities of the RAC process and, especially, the evaluation of learning acquired outside of school must take into account the experiential nature of this learning by proposing a methodology and a regulatory framework that are adapted accordingly (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2021b ; Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, 2005). The Council emphasizes that recognition of informal and experiential learning is not about recognizing individuals' experience per se, but rather about recognizing the competencies that came from that experience.

Definition and aims of RAC at the college level

RAC at the college level is defined as “a process for adults who have accumulated a significant amount of life or work experience” (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, 2021b, p. 17).

It takes the form of an **individualized approach**, structured according to a series of steps, with the **goal of obtaining a diploma**. This decision by the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur (MES) to aim for the diploma or attestation of college studies is based on the desire to clearly situate the sphere of intervention of education in terms of recognition, so that its development is based on unambiguous foundations as to its place in the supply chain.

Frameworks

The Council notes that the right to RAC at the college level is timidly addressed in the *General and Vocational Colleges Act* and the *College Education Regulations*, and is primarily associated with the exemption, equivalency and substitution sections of the latter. Thus, the current frameworks do not explicitly refer to the RAC process and do not require colleges to organize a RAC service to implement it. The lack of guidelines offered by these frameworks creates confusion as to the very nature of the RAC process at the college level, which is often reduced, in people's minds, to a process of recognition of academic achievements. In principle, according to these frameworks, the RAC process is offered to both adults and young people and in both regular and continuing education, but this is poorly reflected in practice.

The RAC process at the college level

The RAC process consists of five main steps: information on the process, submission of the application and self-evaluation of competencies, validation of the application, evaluation of competencies, and official recognition, resulting in the certification of studies. The evaluation of competencies integrated by the person during their work and life experiences forms the core of this process (MES, 2021b). The government's desire to position the process as a recognized qualification pathway has contributed to its growth over the past twenty years.

Although the RAC paradigm calls for the mobilization of competencies rather than their development, the RAC approach also contributes to training, whether through self-directed preparatory activities, further study or, more broadly, the performance of work in order to demonstrate skills. The Council believes that RAC is too often placed in opposition to training rather than being seen as contributing to individuals' development.

Current situation : A few statistics¹

The Council has observed that, with respect to RAC, college program offerings have grown and diversified over the past decade. In the public college network, the RAC process is offered in all 48 CEGEPs, but to varying degrees. In most cases, this approach is aimed at programs that lead to an Attestation of College Studies (ACS). For example, there are 184 program codes in RAC across 13 training sectors. The applications are mainly concentrated in the administration, commerce and computer technology sector and the social, educational and legal services sector, for which tools have been available for some time. The RAC approach is mostly used in continuing education and remains marginal in regular education.

In addition, the number of candidates at the validation step of their application has been on the rise for the past ten years and was nearly 4000 in 2018-2019. The majority of applications are still concentrated in programs leading to an ACS. However, the increase in applications to programs leading to a Diploma of College Studies (DCS) is starting to reduce the observed gap. The vast majority of candidates in the process are Canadian citizens. Representation of people with permanent resident status is higher than it was ten years ago, and there are still very few Indigenous applicants. People with recognized refugee or temporary resident status are marginally represented. Finally, the majority of candidates at this step are women and are generally 25 years old or older.

Key issues and recommendations

In its brief, the Council presents issues to be considered on a priority basis and makes recommendations to the various actors concerned. To do so, it relies on its review of the current RAC framework at the college level, the use of structuring literature on the recognition of experiential learning, the analysis of available statistical data and, in particular, the consultation of stakeholders involved in implementing RAC at the college level.

These issues are grouped into three broad categories: issues in higher education, issues at the institutional level, and issues at the individual level. A first issue is presented separately at the outset, that of perceptions of RAC, given its critical importance and impact on all the others.

¹ The data analyzed come from a database of RAC program offerings provided by the Fédération des cégeps and from data obtained from the MES on enrolment at the application validation stage, which come from the Socrate system (Système de gestion des données d'élèves au collégial).

Perceptions of RAC

The consultations carried out by the Council reveal a consensus on the importance of this overarching issue. *Confusion, misunderstanding, resistance, prejudice, credibility, worth, promotion, information*: these are some of the terms used by the people we met to reflect the persistent presence of this perception issue not only in the discourse of the college education community, but also within partner organizations, other ministries and the labour market. The Council sheds light on this important issue in order to identify its main aspects.

Information, misconceptions and recognition of the value of the RAC mechanism

Despite the efforts made over the past few years, much work remains to be done with respect to information, to ensure that RAC at the college level is accurately understood by the various stakeholders, both within educational institutions and externally, and by the individuals concerned. The consultations conducted by the Council confirmed that it is important to preserve and strengthen the structuring role of the MES in providing information about and promoting RAC.

A number of misconceptions surrounding RAC still exist: that it's an easy or quick way to obtain a degree, that it's displacing the student population and jeopardizing teaching jobs, that it's a cumbersome process, etc. According to the people consulted, misconceptions of RAC may be based on a lack of knowledge, apprehensions, resistance or prejudice. Some people believe these misconceptions are marginal and do not impede the development of RAC or activities held in schools, while others consider they carry enough weight to hinder RAC growth.

One of the central ideas related to this issue is the perceived value of the RAC process and, ultimately, of the diploma that results from it. The people consulted testified that it is necessary to work on the perceived value of the diploma and competencies recognized by the RAC process. In educational institutions, the academic council is identified as one of the preferred venues for this purpose. It also appears to be difficult to enhance the value of the mechanism in settings where RAC is not well developed. This can lead to a vicious circle: few requests and few offers for the process, difficulty in developing expertise. Finally, the primary responsibility of the MES to promote RAC as a legitimate and promising qualification pathway was reaffirmed during the Council's consultations. It seems important to bolster the weight given to the value of RAC by considering it not only as an option but as an individual right, and that this be more strongly asserted in the related frameworks. The Council notes that these frameworks at the college level take little account of recent developments and that their lack of guidelines serves to maintain confusion as to the very nature of this recognition and its scope of intervention.

Issues in higher education

Access to administrative data and research on RAC

The availability of data to monitor the status of RAC at the systemic level was one of the major issues raised by all the stakeholders consulted. Moreover, research on RAC remains a relatively young field of study that would benefit from targeted research grants and from reinforcing the mandate of the Centres of Expertise for the Recognition of Acquired Competencies (CERACs) in this regard. A mature RAC system would have the data to conduct and publish evaluations of its services and collaborate with the research community to learn more about, among other things, the experiences of people who have gone through the process, both during and after it (Bélisle and Fernandez, 2018). Furthermore, while the

process is competency-based, the Council notes that colleges' reports of their RAC-related activities are still associated with courses, which complicates the process and demonstrates an unfinished integration of the competency-based approach into the administrative data systems to ensure consistency with this paradigm which has been in place since 1993.

Government leadership and partnerships among main actors

According to those consulted, there is no doubt as to the importance of the MES's involvement in the RAC dossier at the college level and its responsibility to set the broad orientations of this mechanism as well as to establish the legal and regulatory bases supporting its implementation. Many feel that its commitment is essential for the continuation of the work and the full development of the service offer. Therefore, the Council believes that the MES must maintain leadership in this area, which includes ensuring a productive sharing of responsibilities among the main actors in RAC at the college level. The college network and the MES are at a pivotal point in solidifying the foundations of their respective contributions. The actors concerned cannot afford to avoid a reflection on the sharing of roles and responsibilities, with a view to complementing each other's mandates.

Synergy with the workplace

The systemic issues of RAC relate specifically to its place within the educational ecosystem and its bearing on productivity issues in the employment sector. According to many of those consulted, RAC is not a panacea for addressing critical labour needs. First of all, it is a matter of promoting an enlightened understanding so that everyone can situate its rightful social contribution in order to ensure its continuity. They believe that RAC can be leveraged to address workforce needs by first targeting areas of high demand. The challenge is to clearly define the cases in which RAC can truly support the path to employment. The current project in the field of childhood education appears to be a model that should be strengthened, adapted and expanded to other fields in response to labour shortage issues in certain sectors. The implementation of college certifications offered by the business services of the public college network could also foster the use of learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings.

Issues at the institutional level

Positioning RAC within educational institutions

Those consulted recognize that implementing RAC principles within colleges is a challenge in terms of the value attached to the process. In addition, one of the key issues related to organizational structures is the "organic link" between RAC and the institutions' governing bodies and management, as well as the place it must occupy within them in order to respond effectively to the needs of individuals and the workforce and to promote its mission. Twenty years after the publication of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* (2002), it seems that RAC is still struggling to take its place among the colleges' priorities. Continuing education and regular education bodies often evolve in parallel, each giving priority to addressing its own issues. Many of those consulted agreed that RAC is a complex and specialized dossier, and that it would be to the advantage of all college stakeholders to familiarize themselves with this system in order to share a concerted vision and to value its contribution to the qualification of individuals and to college graduation. Institutional choices also seem to affect the development of the RAC service and contribute, in the opinion of some, to the perception of a marginal service within the institution itself.

Human resources

The development and deployment of the RAC service offering is dependent on the human resources invested in the process. Those consulted identified a challenge in recruiting staff for RAC, which requires a specific expertise profile. Indeed, full deployment of RAC requires the expertise of the teams involved, which is easier to develop when their members can devote themselves entirely to developing this niche. Some progress has been made in recent years with respect to the provision of training and support. For example, CERACs receive a grant to provide RAC consulting services to public and private colleges that receive funding, intended in particular for professional staff.

Developing the service offer

All CEGEPs now offer the RAC process, although program offerings in this area vary from college to college. The majority of applications are in colleges located in urban centres. However, the size of the college and number of applications do not automatically correspond. The Council also notes a clear concentration of applications in a few programs. Although the number of applications at the validation stage more than doubled from 2010 to 2019, the trend appears to have stabilized since 2014. Use of the RAC approach is mainly observed in continuing education and remains marginal in the regular education sector.

Quality assurance systems and harmonization of practices

During the Council's consultations, concerns were raised about the mechanisms in place to ensure the quality and rigour of the RAC process in colleges and, more broadly, throughout the college system. A reference framework developed by CERAC (forthcoming) will aim to facilitate the establishment of a quality assurance mechanism within institutions. Through its recent methodological expertise centre, CERAC Marie-Victorin also has the necessary resources to support the teams responsible for developing tools in the colleges. Quality assurance mechanisms can, depending on the case, be set out in the *Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement (IPESA)* or the *Politique institutionnelle de la reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences (PIRAC)* (institutional policy on the recognition of acquired competencies). According to those consulted, the PIRAC can also support institutional buy-in and mobilization around the RAC process.

Issues at the individual level

RAC accessibility

On the one hand, access to RAC at the college level may be compromised by what does or does not happen upstream of the process. Three main parameters are involved: awareness of the existence of the mechanism; referral to the path best suited to the individual's educational and professional development; and mastery of non-program-specific but required competencies to ensure success of the RAC process, such as the level of literacy.

On the other hand, administrative constraints hinder some profiles. RAC candidates do not have full-or part-time attendance status, because they are not considered students (MES, 2021a). The two most frequently reported administrative constraints relate to candidates' inability to receive financial assistance for their studies or to have access to a work or study permit. Thus, the RAC process is not available to international students, temporary workers or refugees, unless the candidate is also enrolled in full-time training. The Council believes that it is important to pay particular attention to the issue of affordability of the RAC process for financially vulnerable people and to break down administrative barriers that limit access for refugees.

Moreover, accessibility to RAC may be compromised by the difficulty of accessing certain pathways that are recommended at the time of application validation, such as combined paths² or further study. In practice, the implementation of combined paths is complex, as course offerings to cohorts do not follow the same parameters as RAC's individualized pathways. Similar difficulties are encountered when there is a need for further study, offered individually or in small groups, to acquire missing components of education or training. The Council's consultations highlighted the value of distance learning for the deployment of combined paths and further study, and even for access to the RAC process itself.

Support and guidance during the process

The Council stresses the importance of access to support and guidance for individuals at all stages of the RAC process, especially for immigrants (CSE, 2021; Dagenais and Langevin, 2016). In addition, just like students, RAC candidates may have special needs such as learning disabilities or relating to stress management. In this respect, the main challenge identified in the consultations was access to support services for people in need and the availability of regular education services for people in the RAC process.

2 These pathways combine the RAC process with academic courses in order to achieve proficiency in all the required competencies.

Recommendations

The recommendations addressed to the actors concerned are organized according to the broad orientations resulting from the reading of the issues brought to light by the Council's work.

1. Value and promote RAC at the college level in order to influence perceptions and avoid abuses in the perceived value of the resulting diploma	
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Minister of Higher Education	1. Update the frameworks for RAC at the college level (laws, regulations, policies) in order to affirm more forcefully the right to RAC, to specify the nature of this process, to clarify the fact that it is also accessible in regular education, and to consolidate the responsibilities of educational institutions in this regard.
Minister of Higher Education	2. Support colleges financially in activities to promote their RAC program offerings, particularly in fields with a high demand for labour.
Minister of Higher Education	3. Organize a provincewide campaign to promote RAC to the general public.
CERAC	4. Intensify and expand their support, facilitation, and outreach activities to make RAC more widely known to the various categories of college personnel, partner organizations, and employers.
Colleges	5. Include in their priorities facilitation and information activities on RAC for staff who may be directly or indirectly affected by it, including teachers, both in regular and continuing education.
2. Better equip RAC actors at the college level and promote synergy in their work	
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Minister of Higher Education	6. Invest in the development of a competency-based RAC reporting system in order to monitor and disseminate data on the status of the recognition of acquired competencies at the college level.
Minister of Higher Education	7. Support research on RAC, particularly research at the college level, through specific grants while facilitating access to the Ministère's administrative data in order to increase knowledge on the topic.
Minister of Higher Education	8. Promote dialogue among the various stakeholders in the college network by setting up and facilitating discussion forums that are representative of all college education sectors.
Minister of Higher Education	9. Pursue funding initiatives for the implementation of college certifications offered by educational institutions' business services, particularly where they can support a continuum to credited higher education.
Minister of Higher Education and other ministers concerned	10. Encourage the emergence of multi-partner projects in targeted fields to address workforce needs, similar to the project carried out in childhood education.

3. Better position and articulate RAC processes within colleges	
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Colleges	11. Employ means adapted to their reality to foster institutional synergy with regard to RAC, for example, adopting a PIRAC, providing better information on RAC to the various categories of personnel concerned, etc.
Colleges	12. Plan for greater cohesion between regular and continuing education so that RAC transcends the boundaries of continuing education and gradually becomes embedded in regular education.
Colleges	13. Invest in the consolidation of institutional expertise in RAC, according to their own reality, to ensure the development and sustainability of the RAC service offer.
Colleges	14. Take advantage of the opportunities offered by the networking of practices and sharing of expertise to optimize deployment of the RAC offer, including those leveraging the use of digital tools in the process.
4. Improve access to RAC as well as support and guidance for candidates	
Actors concerned	Recommendations
Minister of Higher Education and Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Solidarity	15. Consider financial compensation for employers to release employed individuals who wish to take advantage of the RAC process.
Minister of Higher Education	16. Consider financial incentives for individuals who pursue RAC in fields experiencing workforce shortages, after evaluating the impact of free tuition in the childhood education initiatives.
Minister of Higher Education	17. Address the issue of access to the Loans and Bursaries Program for unemployed and low-income RAC applicants, including access to bursaries in targeted fields.
Minister of Higher Education	18. Revise the requirements for RAC applicants with refugee status so that they no longer have to provide a study permit in order for their file to be deemed compliant with RAC eligibility standards.
Minister of Higher Education	19. Support college projects leveraging distance learning to facilitate access to combined paths, further study in a group, and the RAC process as a whole.
Minister of Higher Education	20. Support colleges with a specific continuing education allocation aimed at promoting access to support services for RAC candidates, including special needs services and preparation for the standardized French test.
Colleges	21. Take the necessary steps to expand access to support services for RAC candidates.

Conclusion

In response to the Minister of Higher Education's concern about the potential of RAC to meet critical labour needs, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation invites the Minister to focus on the development of projects specific to certain high-demand fields and to ensure facilitating conditions for both candidates and employers, such as free tuition and funding for the release of employees who initiate a RAC process. However, for the Council, the utility of RAC goes beyond economic and labour market needs, but embodies an emancipatory concept that promotes the development of individuals.

In addition to the recommendations listed above, the Council invites the Minister to consider the typology of RAC developmental levels (Bélisle and Fernandez, 2018) to guide decisions about what actions to take to further develop this system at the college level.

There are still questions of interest that need to be explored in order to further reflect on RAC at the college level and give renewed momentum to this avenue, which is destined to occupy an increasingly important role in the future. For example, what are the specific issues related to the recognition of acquired competencies for students enrolled in regular education, and how can these individuals be better informed about the possibilities offered by this process and empowered to use it (CSE, 2022)?

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