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# A Québec Qualifications Framework for Recognizing, Comparing and Supporting the Development of Competencies

## Summary

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Québec 



# A Québec Qualifications Framework for Recognizing, Comparing and Supporting the Development of Competencies

In its brief titled *Un cadre national de qualification pour reconnaître, comparer et soutenir le développement des compétences au Québec* (A Québec Qualifications Framework for Recognizing, Comparing and Supporting the Development of Competencies), the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation examines the value of creating a Québec qualifications framework as a tool to help structure the education and training system. This brief aims to nourish the conversation on the importance of having an overarching vision of adult and continuing education, and reflects the need to establish an institutional and political architecture to frame and support its development. It is based on the concerns raised by a variety of stakeholders<sup>1</sup> about the factors that hinder the initiation, fluidity and continuity of adults' educational and career paths, as well as the challenges faced by the labour market in terms of upskilling and requalifying workers. Following its consultations and analyses, the Conseil formulated seven recommendations under three broad orientations, designed to recognize, compare and support the development of competencies in Québec.

## **A Québec qualifications framework: a potential solution to challenges faced by the education and qualification system**

A qualifications framework serves to place educational and professional certifications in relation to each other according to set levels of knowledge and skills. Its primary functions are to promote the understanding, comparability, compatibility and transferability of qualifications. These functions can vary in their application depending on the education system and the involvement of stakeholders from the education and workplace communities, as well as civil society. Beyond national or provincial interests, implementing qualifications frameworks aims to promote transparency in the process of recognizing prior learning and competencies, facilitate the cross-border mobility of learners and workers, and support lifelong and life-wide learning. In addition, qualifications frameworks can provide greater fluidity in educational and career paths, while optimizing access, flexibility and movement between different education and training sectors or institutions, between the education and employment sectors, and between different workplaces.

<sup>1</sup> Experts and representatives from the education community, community organizations, First Nations and Inuit communities, employers, unions and organizations representing the interests of adult learners or workers.



 Human is at the heart of the Québec qualifications framework

## Chapter 1 — Québec’s education and training system

Adult and continuing education is a vast field that encompasses several areas, including alphabetization and literacy, francization, socio-professional integration, initial training, refresher training, professional development, as well as corporate training and citizenship education. The services offered in this field involve several categories of actors. In addition to the ministries responsible for developing and implementing government policies, strategies, measures and plans affecting the provision of “formal” education and training, as well as the educational establishments that apply them in the field, other players in various fields of activity play a significant role in enhancing adult competencies through “non-formal” or “informal” training, with a view to lifelong and life-wide learning.

### The education and training system as a social construct

Since the 1960s, three different historical periods have shaped the field of education and qualifications in Québec, each determined by the vision of a dominant frame of reference that has marked the policies and developments that have emerged since then.

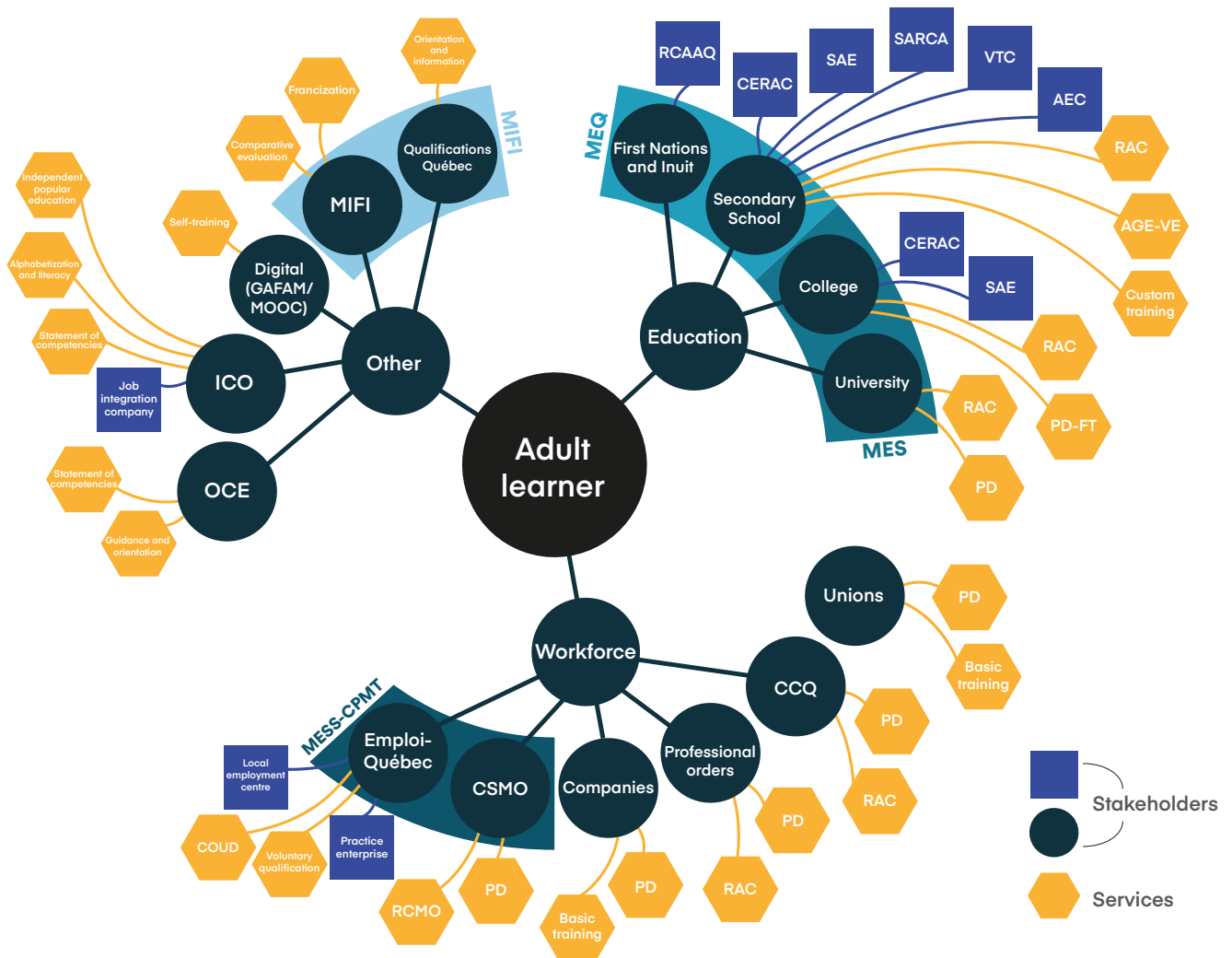
- **Social-democratic:** Restructuring of the field of adult education based on a humanist vision.
- **Neoliberal:** Neoliberal approach that reoriented public action in education and qualification.
- **Liberal-social:** Reconciliation of the humanistic and economic aims of education and qualification.

Today’s education and qualification system is difficult to define, as it is made up of a multitude of stakeholders offering a plethora of formal, non-formal and informal learning programs, whose official recognition remains a challenge.

The figure below illustrates the complex system faced by learners wishing to embark on an education or training program. It is important to note that this diagram is an illustration, not an exhaustive mapping of the options available.

**Figure 1 :**

Illustration of the main formal and non-formal stakeholders in adult education



\* The diagram shows only those stakeholders involved in formal and non-formal training. For the sake of legibility and to reflect the adult and continuing education system, informal learning opportunities are not included.

\*\* The diagram illustrates the services to which adult learners have direct access, rather than the full range of services offered by the various stakeholders.

AEC:	Adult Education Centre	MOOC:	Massive Open Online Course
AGE:	Adult General Education	OCE:	Observatoire compétences-emploi
CCQ:	Commission de la construction du Québec	PD:	Professional Development
CERAC:	Centre of Expertise for the Recognition of Acquired Competencies	RAC:	Recognition of Acquired Competencies
COUD:	Short-term training program	RCAAQ:	Regroupement des centres d'amitié autochtones du Québec
CPMT:	Commission des partenaires du marché du travail	RCMO:	Workforce Skills Recognition
CSMO:	Sectoral labour committees	SAE:	Business services
GAFAM:	Google, Apple, Facebook (Meta), Amazon et Microsoft	SARCA:	Reception, referral, counselling and support services
ICO:	Independent community organizations	TE:	Technical Education
MEQ:	Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec	VE:	Vocational Education
MES:	Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur	VTC:	Vocational Training Centre
MESS:	Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale		
MIFI:	Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration		

Changes made to the education and qualification system by public authorities over the last few decades have been driven largely as a response to labour market needs. Without denying the importance of economic and employment issues, the Conseil believes it's necessary to think more broadly, to move away from a utilitarian vision of education and focus on the adult learner. In line with this thinking, the primary motivation for public action in education and training should be the development of human potential, following an approach that fosters lifelong and life-wide learning.



## Chapter 2 — Conceptualizing a qualifications framework

Internationally, nearly 150 countries have already set up a qualifications framework or are in the process of doing so. The international experience of qualifications frameworks shows a similarity in the challenges faced by education and qualification systems around the world, and in the tools deployed by public authorities to surmount them. The main objectives of these frameworks are largely in line with the needs and challenges of Québec's education and qualification system: improve transparency and understanding of the system; facilitate upward mobility of the workforce and adult learners; promote access, transfer and progression in learning pathways; and regulate quality assurance of qualifications.

An analysis of the contexts of the European Qualifications Framework, the national qualifications frameworks of England and France, and the Ontario Qualifications Framework reveals the diversity of forms this tool may take, and raises questions about its real ability to meet established objectives.

### Defining a qualifications framework

A national qualifications framework is first and foremost a structuring tool that enables qualifications to be situated in relation to each other, according to a scale that increases with the complexity of learning levels, and which can be more or less inclusive depending on the wishes of the public authorities.

Following the example of the French national framework for professional qualifications, it is possible to integrate the recognition of prior learning and competencies into this structure or, as advocated by the European Qualifications Framework, to attempt to remove institutional obstacles to learning pathways in order to promote lifelong learning. To inspire confidence in the tool among stakeholders and society as a whole, ensure their support throughout the implementation process, and guarantee its sustainability, it seems essential to adopt a multi-stakeholder governance structure that is detached from politics and independent of the influence of a single agency or ministry.

For the purposes of this brief, the Conseil defines a qualification as a set of knowledge and competencies attested by a diploma or title awarded by a recognized body. The scope of a Québec qualifications framework would specify whether only qualifications awarded by the ministries responsible for education, higher education and employment would be recognized, or whether a more inclusive approach would be taken so as to include qualifications awarded by other bodies too.



## Chapter 3 — Objectives of a Québec qualifications framework

In light of the distinctive features of Québec's education and qualification system, and the conceptual notions that provide a stronger understanding of the potential benefits of a qualifications framework, the Conseil examined whether it would be advisable for the province to adopt such a tool to structure its education and qualification system. To address the concerns raised by the representatives interviewed and the challenges posed by this system, a Québec qualifications framework could pursue four main objectives:

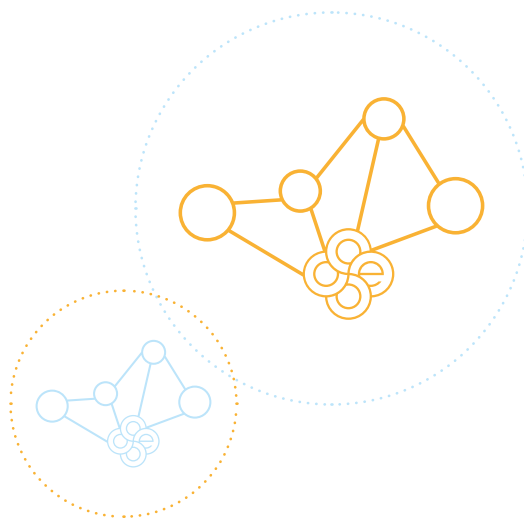
**Objective 1 :** Promote fluidity in learning paths and mobility on the job market

**Objective 2 :** Improve transparency and understanding of Québec's education and qualification system

**Objective 3 :** Improve governance of Québec's education and qualification system and foster a culture of continuous learning

**Objective 4 :** Provide a tool for accountability and quality assurance for Québec's education and qualification system

By promoting fluidity in learning paths and mobility on the job market, by improving transparency, understanding and governance of the education and qualification system while fostering the development of a culture of lifelong learning and, finally, by providing an instrument for quality assurance of this system, one of the primary ambitions of a Québec qualifications framework would be to support lifelong and life-wide learning.



## Chapter 4 — Conditions for implementing a Québec qualifications framework

To complete its examination of the value of implementing a qualifications framework adapted to Québec's reality, the Conseil looked at the challenges that would need to be overcome during implementation. While this framework has the potential to meet specific objectives determined on the basis of the needs and emerging challenges of the parties concerned, certain questions remain, notably as to the feasibility of its implementation and its real capacity to meet expectations.

Various controversies have been identified in the scientific literature, which has at times taken a critical look at national qualifications frameworks. Among them, the idea that the latter would convey an instrumental conception of education has been recorded mainly from the English model, and calls into question the primacy of the learning outcomes approach. Despite the richness of these reflections and the need to bear them in mind when considering this tool as an instrument of public action, other examples of national qualifications frameworks provide nuances to these criticisms. The French framework, for example, is part of a wide-ranging reform of vocational training, and encourages ongoing training. The Ontario framework, on the other hand, seems to respond satisfactorily to the administrative objectives set by public decision-makers.

In light of international experience, some researchers have been able to identify elements that seem to have facilitated the implementation of national qualifications frameworks. These include entrusting management of the framework to a coordinating body that is independent of government, multi-stakeholder governance that contributes to the development of a common understanding and language with regard to the value and content of qualifications, a solid infrastructure that can ensure the quality of qualifications, the adherence of all government bodies to the qualifications framework, which must reflect consistent policies, and sustained and substantial funding to implement the framework.

Comments gathered from individuals working in the field of adult education and training also raised a number of issues that are relevant to the analysis, calling into question the limits and feasibility of implementing a qualifications framework in Québec. Many of the stakeholders emphasized the urgent need to better structure the system, while highlighting the tools that already exist but are too often rarely or poorly applied, and which would make it possible to partially overcome certain challenges and respond to current needs. However, few of them were willing to consider transforming their practices in the event of the adoption of a tool such as a qualifications framework. This hesitation was frequently justified by the fear of seeing a new layer of complexity added to an already complex system, but also of seeing their freedom of action constrained by the implementation of a prescriptive tool.

Moreover, many stakeholders questioned the capacity of the current adult education and training system to establish a multi-stakeholder governance process that would provide for equitable representation of all stakeholders, free from power struggles, and that would position the adult learner at the heart of its concerns. Stakeholders said that in order to continue the reflection on the value of a qualifications framework, they would need to see the contours of this framework clearly defined, so as to be able to grasp its limits and therefore better understand its operation and objectives. This reflection could also be used to consider potential measures to support the implementation of a Québec qualifications framework, which could help meet the objectives established at the outset of its design.





## Chapitre 5 — Orientations and recommendations

To analyze the suitability of a Québec qualifications framework, the Conseil consulted a wide range of stakeholders in the education and workplace communities, as well as studies and research conducted on the subject both here and internationally. In the wake of its previous brief on the inclusion of immigrant families, its consultations highlighted a major need to increase the clarity and transparency of an education and qualification system that is difficult for adult learners, and those who support them, to understand. Consultations also revealed the need to put the adult learner back at the heart of stakeholders' concerns, as service provision is too often approached from an organizational or sectoral point of view.

### Orientation 1 Provide Québec with a structuring tool to promote comparison and clarity of qualifications

The Conseil recommends:

- Recommendation 1. That the Québec Government create a regulatory body (hereinafter referred to as the “*regulatory body*”) to develop and implement a Québec qualifications framework in collaboration with the stakeholders concerned<sup>2</sup>, and equip it with the powers and resources necessary for its proper operation.
- Recommendation 2. That the Minister of Education, the Minister of Higher Education, the Minister of Labour, the Minister Responsible for Social Solidarity and Community Action, the Minister of Immigration, Francization and Integration, as well as the other ministers involved in supporting adult learners, maintain and expand the support services offered to all adult learners.
- Recommendation 3. That the Government review the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* as quickly as possible to bring it into line with new social and economic realities, and support the implementation of a Québec qualifications framework.

<sup>2</sup> These stakeholders are specified in recommendation 4.



## Orientation 2 Establish conditions to ensure the adherence, validity, sustainability and efficiency of a Québec qualifications framework

### The Conseil recommends:

- Recommendation 4.** That the Government ensure that the *regulatory body* has an independent, multi-stakeholder governance structure. This structure must include representatives from the main ministries concerned<sup>3</sup>, the various levels of education, the business community, unions, professional orders and community organizations in the fields of education and labour.
- Recommendation 5.** That the *regulatory body* make sure to consult, from the outset and throughout the process of creating the tool, with a variety of managers and front-line stakeholders involved in issuing and recognizing qualifications at all levels.
- Recommendation 6.** That the *regulatory body* maintain a proactive approach, based in particular on studies, research and evaluations of national qualifications frameworks in Québec and internationally. This should include careful monitoring of the potential and issues surrounding the use of cutting-edge technologies, such as the Semantic Web and artificial intelligence, to support the development, implementation and continuous updating of the qualifications framework.

## Orientation 3 Strengthen and expand the use of the recognition of prior learning and competencies at all levels

### The Conseil recommends:

- Recommendation 7.** That the Minister of Education and the Minister of Higher Education increase efforts to support the provision of services for the recognition of prior learning and competencies for all adult learners, in all fields of activity and at all levels of qualification, including post-secondary education.

<sup>3</sup> Ministère de l'Éducation; Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur; Ministère de l'Emploi et de la Solidarité sociale; Ministère de l'Immigration, de la Francisation et de l'Intégration; Ministère de l'Économie, de l'Innovation et de l'Énergie.

## Conclusion

With the publication of this brief, the Conseil hopes to stimulate a wide-ranging and forward-looking conversation on the value of providing Québec with its own qualifications framework, a structuring tool that has already been or is in the process of being put in place in nearly 150 countries.

Based on its research, consultations and analysis, the Conseil believes that the potential benefits associated with the implementation of a Québec qualifications framework—for learners, organizations and society as a whole—far outweigh the investment required and the disruption in practices that it is likely to engender. However, it should be noted that this implementation would not be a panacea for all the challenges faced by adult learners. The benefits of such a framework on the system as a whole would be greater if it were part of a substantial update of the *Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training* to adapt it to recent transformations in education, work and society.

To ensure the value and credibility of such a framework, it is important that it be overseen by an independent regulatory body bringing together a diversity of government, private sector and community stakeholders, representing both education and the workplace. This multi-stakeholder governance for developing, implementing and updating such a framework would not only foster its adoption and validity, but also provide an excellent opportunity to deepen connections and dialogue among stakeholders whose efforts are still too often undertaken in parallel, without any real synergy. By putting the focus back on the learner, this new forum for recognizing, comparing and supporting the development of competencies would help make Québec a truly innovative learning society.



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