

CONSEIL SUPÉRIEUR DE L'ÉDUCATION



**BECAUSE THE WAYS OF PURSUING
UNIVERSITY STUDIES
HAVE CHANGED...**

BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, RESEARCH, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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SUMMARY

Québec 

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In its brief *Parce que les façons de réaliser un projet d'études universitaires ont changé...*, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation considers how the ways of pursuing university studies have changed¹ More specifically, it examines certain phenomena that, while not new, are occurring with greater frequency in Québec universities: working while studying, balancing studies and family responsibilities, enrolling in part-time studies and returning to studies. To gain a new understanding of the university's role in light of these transformations shaping students' relationship with their studies, the Conseil elected to narrow its focus on the students themselves.

Starting from various research activities, the brief examines multiple perspectives on university students, university-level institutions, and the Government. This tripartite view also forms the foundation on which the Conseil submits its recommendations and proposes courses of action.

1 PERSPECTIVE ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

With the advent of increased democracy in higher education since the 1960s, the profile of a typical Québec university student has become a diverse one, reflecting their sociodemographic characteristics. More importantly, this image is now mirrored in how students engage in and pursue their university studies. In fact, many students have adopted a non-traditional relationship with their studies, namely by working while studying, balancing studies and family responsibilities, enrolling in part-time studies or returning to studies. Although often interrelated, these phenomena are herein discussed individually, to clearly identify the key issues and challenges associated with each.

WORKING WHILE STUDYING

- Approximately 70% of university students hold a job while studying. These are “students who are working” or “workers who are studying”.
- While combining work and study is often necessary due to financial reasons, it also embodies a way of life deeply rooted in cultural and social trends, as well as in the demands of the Québec labour market.
- According to research, working while studying has less impact on academic outcomes than it does on the duration of studies.
- Work experience can also be an asset when entering the labour force, particularly in an environment where there is a high number of university graduates and employers value such experience.

BALANCING STUDIES AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

- A not insubstantial number of students are parents. In the Université du Québec network, this group represents 25% of the student population. Moreover, this is likely to continue to grow, given the rapidly rising demand for a highly skilled workers and the importance of lifelong learning.
- For biological and cultural reasons, the responsibility of balancing studies and family weighs particularly heavy on women.
- Research has shown that while being a student parent is associated with an increased risk of interrupting or extending the duration of studies, it does not appear to have a negative impact on academic outcomes. Indeed, being a parent can sometimes be a motivating factor in studies.
- The need for child care is high on the list of student parents' demands.

¹ For the purposes of this brief, these refer to credit programs only.

ENROLLING IN PART-TIME STUDIES

- More and more non-degree programs are now being offered, with students primarily enrolling in them part time. In contrast, some degree programs, disciplines and research training programs still require a full-time commitment.
- Women make up the overwhelming majority of part-time students.
- In general, part-time studies are associated with lower graduation rates than full-time studies.
- For some students, notably those with parental responsibilities and those returning to studies, part-time enrolment can offer a way to enter university and persevere in their studies.

RETURNING TO STUDIES

- One in five undergraduate students is over 25 years of age. Approximately one in three master's students is over 30 and one in four doctoral students is older than 35. The percentage of students older than the conventional age limit of a traditional education path is higher in non-degree programs.
- Although non-degree programs are typically attended by individuals who by virtue of their age are likely returning to studies, a significant number of this group can be found in degree programs, particularly at the master's level, with the result that both first-time and returning students take their seats side-by-side in the same lecture halls.
- Of those returning to studies, women constitute a higher number.
- While returning students often have more work or parental responsibilities, according to research they also tend to achieve better academic outcomes.

2 PERSPECTIVE ON INSTITUTIONAL AWARENESS AND PRACTICES

Over the years many initiatives have been undertaken to address the new ways students pursue university studies, however these are often limited to the local level and incomplete. These initiatives can be grouped into four areas: the education offer, types of enrolment, rules governing admission, pathways and certification, and support and services for students.

With regard to the education offer, institutions have shown leadership in reaching out to students who have adopted a non-traditional relationship with their studies, namely by:

- developing continuing education;
- offering university preparatory courses;
- increasing the number of non-degree programs;
- increasing the number of work-based master's and doctoral programs offered;
- creating professional development programs for working professionals;
- developing programs for new immigrants.

This diversification in the offer of education programs is not without certain challenges, however, notably those arising from the lack of common standards related to the goals of the different programs and consequently the ties between each.

Institutions are also offering part-time studies, evening, weekend and summer courses, distance education and off-campus learning, types of enrolment that primarily—but not exclusively—target non-traditional students. In this regard, the Conseil notes that:

- full-time enrolment is often promoted (if not required) in some disciplines and research training;
- the offer of evening, weekend and summer courses varies depending on the institution and disciplines;
- although many institutions currently offer distance education and off-campus learning, these reach only a small percentage of students, raising questions of cohesiveness and efficiency in the development and quality of programs offered throughout Québec.

Rules governing admission, pathways and certification can either facilitate or hinder the path of non-traditional students as they engage in and attend university.

- Admission based on mature entry varies according to the institution, field or program.
- Despite measures to promote recognition of prior learning and competencies, they are not yet common practice.

- While institutional bylaws typically govern interruption of studies, there are scant few measures in place for a temporary absence, for example to fulfil parental responsibilities. In addition, both must be authorized by a faculty member or program administrator.
- Some institutions grant degrees based on completion of three certificates and diplomas for work done in incomplete programs. This can lead to challenges arising from defining the goals of the programs and the ties between them.

Lastly, many institutions are providing support and services specifically for students with parental responsibilities or who are returning to studies. However, these are perceived to be insufficient, particularly those intended for student parents. Moreover, the number of learning-through-employment opportunities available to students during their studies—internships, teaching assistant or lecturing positions—are not enough to meet demand. Lastly, while some institutions provide bursaries to students in need, these are often reserved for promising students who fit the traditional model.

Given these findings, it appears that the degree of institutional awareness to the new ways students pursue a university education varies, not only from one institution to the next but within the same institution.

3 PERSPECTIVE ON GOVERNMENTAL FRAMEWORKS AND POLICY

The Conseil reviewed a number of governmental frameworks and policies to gain an insight into how the state takes into account the new ways of pursuing university studies. It found that a regard for the traditional education path appears to prevail, except in the case of working students, which is seen as both normal and desirable, particularly when the job is closely related to the field of study. Consequently, traditional education paths “enriched” by workplace experience are favoured, while continuing education, non-degree programs and part-time studies are primarily associated with individuals who would not otherwise have had access to university studies at the “regular” time. The Conseil noted the following:

- Under current university funding rules, part-time students can be a financial burden for institutions and there is a lack of funding specifically allocated for recognition of prior learning or competencies;
- Although student financial aid measures contain some provisions for student parents, part-time students and those returning to studies, these often appear to be added piecemeal and come with limitations;
- Scholarships tend to favour promising traditional students. There are some provisions stipulated for student parents, part-time students and those returning to school, yet many of them are subject to approval by the supervisor or academic director.

Government measures that promote societal goals such as fostering higher birth rates and a better quality of life for families are primarily conceived in a model where parenthood typically follows the completion of an education. Consequently, these measures tend to favour those individuals that follow the traditional trajectory of education first, career second and family third. To wit, student parents are not eligible for the Québec Parental Insurance Plan, and face challenges accessing child care services, which are often ill-adapted to their schedules.

Lastly, with regard to the Québec education system, governmental frameworks in the area of skills training and labour market development are largely intended for other levels of instruction prior to university. The role universities play in the area of continuing education remains minimal.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS AND COURSES OF ACTION

Based on its tripartite perspective on the student, the university and the Government, the Conseil herewith provides recommendations and courses of action whereby it calls on all stakeholders to fully consider the new ways students pursue a university education.

4.1 THE CONSEIL’S RECOMMENDATIONS: FOUR OBJECTIVES

1) UPDATE THE IMAGE OF THE QUÉBEC UNIVERSITY STUDENT

For the Conseil, the fact that many Québec students have a non-traditional relationship with post-secondary studies is not an issue, provided that university requirements are met. Rather the problem rests on the conventional image of the student in many policies, regulations, measures and practices, both at the governmental and institutional levels, as well as that conveyed in the mainstream. Consequently the Conseil is in favour of:

- Additional research on university students to guide actions at governmental and institutional levels and within all stakeholder groups;
- Full recognition and clear definition of the role universities play in the area of lifelong learning;
- The revision of many governmental frameworks—particularly those policies on education, family and employment—to consider the far-reaching changes that have been shaping students’ relationship with their studies.

2) FOSTER GREATER COHESIVENESS IN THE PURSUIT OF SOCIETAL GOALS

The Conseil’s review of frameworks and practices at both governmental and institutional levels reveals an inconsistency or lack of cohesiveness in the pursuit of societal goals such as raising the level of education, boosting birth rates, improving the quality life for families, gender equality, facilitating entry into the labour market for young people and job retention. For example, while there has been much talk about greater accessibility to higher education, some institutional bylaws as well as student financial aid measures continue to favour those students who follow a traditional education path. The Conseil maintains that social objectives cannot be conceived in silos: each must be envisioned as an integral part of a holistic vision. For this reason it:

- Calls for greater cohesiveness between discourse and practice, as well as between practices themselves;
- Promotes the engagement and partnership of the various ministries and agencies on the issue of working while studying, balancing studies and family responsibilities and lifelong learning.

3) ENSURE EQUITY BETWEEN STUDENTS

As the university system was largely conceived for “traditional” students, specific barriers can hinder those who do not fit this conventional model, particularly women. Starting from the principle that it is part of a university’s mission to accept any individual capable and willing to pursue university studies, the Conseil deems it important to promote equity between students regardless of their relationship to studies, notably by:

- Ensuring that any individual, including those whose life experience has taken them on a different trajectory than the typical school-work-family one, can equitably benefit from support measures to access university studies and encourage perseverance;
- Increasing the number of scholarships awarded to promising students, regardless of the type of enrolment or their education path.

4) ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS IN A CLEAR AND FAIR DIVISION OF RESPONSIBILITIES

A review of governmental and institutional frameworks reveals a lack of clarity in the division of responsibilities related to the new ways students pursue university studies. To address this issue, the Conseil calls on the various stakeholders to agree on a clear and fair division of responsibilities, recommending namely that:

- Stakeholders working with students provide them with everything needed to make informed decisions when planning their studies;
- The Ministère de l’Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche, de la Science et de la Technologie and university institutions agree on guidelines to steer decisions on absences, interruption of studies and part-time studies;
- The Government fully assume its responsibilities in the area of promoting lifelong learning and supporting student parents;
- Employers support employees of all ages in the latter’s pursuit of a university studies.

4.2 COURSES OF ACTION ON EACH PHENOMENON REFLECTING A NON-TRADITIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH STUDIES

1) WORKING WHILE STUDYING

The Conseil hopes that at no time should holding a job be essential to the pursuit of a university studies. That being said, it respects the choice of individuals who wish to hold a job while in studying, but believes it is important they be clearly informed of the downside to working while studying. The Conseil is also in favour of employment related to students’ field of study. In this spirit, it proposes that:

- Financial aid cover real expenses incurred each semester, so that students need not resort to working to pay for basic necessities;

- Students' jobs be aligned as closely as possible with their specific field of study, for example by broadening, where possible, opportunities for paid internships integrated into programs of study, improving the Work/Study Program, and considering the recognition of experiential knowledge acquired on the job;
- Employers support students pursuing a university education, namely by allowing flexible working hours.

2) BALANCING STUDIES AND FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES

Parenthood is unquestionably a right, one that at times carries irreducible obligations. This calls for a collective awareness of the challenge of balancing studies and family responsibilities. As many measures intended to consider the needs of student parents are beyond the scope of the university and fall under the authority of the Government, the Conseil therefore proposes that:

- All student parents, regardless of their source of income, receive financial support during their child's first months;
- Benefits available to student parents, such as research grants and parental leave, be better promoted in the university community;
- Universities adopt transparent guidelines on the authorization of absences, interruption of studies and part-time studies for student parents;
- The number of spaces in daycare centres (particularly those on or near campuses) be increased and places be reserved for the children of student parents;
- The number of drop-in centres—which are more accessible and have more flexible hours than conventional daycare services—also be increased.

3) PART-TIME STUDIES

To be sure, there are many advantages of being a full-time student, such as socialization and acculturation, in addition to the increased likelihood of obtaining a degree. The Conseil is therefore in favour of additional financial support for those part-time students wishing to enrol full time. That being said, the Conseil is aware that some students may need or wish to enrol part-time, and concedes the benefits of this type of enrolment for those who have parental responsibilities or who are returning to studies. Mindful of these benefits and of the availability of support services and measures available to part-time students, it therefore proposes that:

- Programs of study be revised to remove, where possible, the requirement to enrol full time either for a portion or the entirety of a program;
- Student financial aid be established based on the needs for each semester, allowing students to alternate if needed between full-time and part-time study without penalty;
- Universities receive appropriate funding allocated for the admission and guidance of part-time students, to assist the latter in pursuing their studies.

4) RETURNING TO STUDIES

Lifelong learning is a major and continuing trend, and universities are now offering study opportunities to a growing number of students who are returning to studies. Yet all individuals who have the ability and willingness—even those on a trajectory that is neither regular, continuous or linear—must be able to access and benefit from a quality university education. To do so, the proper support is needed. In this perspective, the Conseil proposes that:

- Student financial aid measures for individuals returning to studies be improved and better publicized;
- University practices regarding recognition of prior learning and competencies be optimized, notably through adequate funding;
- Extra effort be undertaken to clearly define education pathways intended specifically for students returning to studies, notably through the establishment of common standards on the level of training and the evaluation process of the programs that consider the location and mode of delivery.

Concerned about the risk of overlapping or even lack of cohesiveness between college and university initiatives in the area of returning to studies, the Conseil thus calls for further examination of this issue.

The integral version of *Parce que les façons de réaliser un projet d'études universitaires ont changé...* (in French only) is available on the Conseil's website at www.cse.gouv.qc.ca; a printed copy can also be requested by telephone at (418) 643-3851.