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COLLEGE CONTINUING EDUCATION: INVISIBLE  
AND UNRECOGNIZED?

Jonathan Martel

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# COLLEGE CONTINUING EDUCATION: INVISIBLE AND UNRECOGNIZED?

Jonathan Martel

## Résumé

*À partir d'une revue de littérature systématique, nous montrons que la formation continue collégiale au Québec est peu représentée dans les publications spécialisées des collèges et qu'elle est généralement absente du champ de recherche en éducation, et ce, malgré son importance dans le secteur de la formation professionnelle et technique. D'abord, nous présentons le contexte de l'éducation et de la formation des adultes collégiale au Québec et montrons son importance comme secteur de formation spécifique de formation. Ensuite, nous présentons les résultats de la recherche documentaire exhaustive qui a été réalisé. À partir de ces résultats, nous montrons que, malgré sa place dans l'éducation des adultes, la formation continue collégiale au Québec demeure un impensé de la recherche. En guise de conclusion, nous proposons des hypothèses qui pourraient expliquer ce manque de visibilité et proposons d'ouvrir des perspectives de recherche sur cet objet d'étude qui mérite une attention particulière.*

## Abstract

*Based on a systematic literature review, we demonstrate that college continuing education in Quebec is poorly represented in colleges' specialized publications and generally absent from the field of educational research, despite its importance in the field of professional and technical training. We first describe the context of adult college education and training in Quebec and demonstrate its significance as a distinct training sector. We then present findings from our exhaustive literature review. Using these results, we show that despite its role in adult education, college continuing education in Quebec remains an unexplored research area. To conclude, we present hypotheses that may explain this lack of visibility and suggest potential research avenues on a subject that merits greater consideration.*

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## Introduction

In this article, we demonstrate that despite its significance in the field of adult education in general and professional and technical training in particular, college continuing education in Quebec is very poorly represented in specialized publications for college<sup>1</sup> faculty and all but absent from the field of educational research. This paper is divided into two parts. In the first, we provide context for the examination of college education and training for adults and demonstrate its significance as a distinct field of education by giving a general overview of available offerings. We present the specific context of the development of college adult education programs by describing its history, as well as characteristics and issues associated with adult college trajectories. To conclude this section, we describe how different professional and technical training options fit into thousands of adults' return to school every year. In the second part, we present results of an extensive literature review of relevant college continuing education research. This literature review allows us to shed light on how researchers have approached our subject of study (Rhoades, 2011). Based on these results, we demonstrate that despite its position in adult education, college continuing education remains unaddressed in the research. Next, we present hypotheses that may justify its lack of visibility. Finally, we present a hypothesis that could explain this lack of visibility and suggest potential research avenues on a subject that merits greater consideration.

### 1. Part 1: Development context of college adult education offerings

We will begin by presenting the college continuing education sector, highlighting the significance of its training offerings in order to situate readers who may not be familiar with college adult education in Quebec. This will also provide greater visibility to the sector and situate it within the field of adult education research.

Labour management and workplace training policies implemented in the 1990s sparked changes to the structure of traditional adult education offerings. Since the 1960s in Quebec, education had primarily been provided by institutions connected to the public school system, such as high school adult education centres, cégeps, and universities, or by community centres; this changed in the 1980s and 1990s. A significant portion of education offerings slowly migrated toward workplace training (Doray and Bélanger, 2005b). This migration can be partially explained by the legislative context and employee incentive programs put in place after Quebec's economic crisis in the 1980s as well as the neoliberal trends that followed. This is true for the arrival of what is commonly called "the 1% law"<sup>2</sup>, which required companies with total payrolls of more than \$250,000 (\$1,000,000 since 2004) to invest 1% of this amount into training (Thériault and Solar, 2013). It should also be noted that another factor to consider in the migration of education offerings is the elimination of free education for part-time college students (Bélanger et al., 2004; Bélanger and Robitaille, 2008b)<sup>3</sup>. In the 1990s, these regulatory changes led to a decrease of nearly 50% in the number of adults in college continuing education, going from approximately

1 In Quebec, colleges are more commonly known as "cégeps" or "CÉGEPs", that is, "collèges d'enseignement général et professionnel" ("general and vocational colleges").

2 *Act to promote workforce skills development and recognition* (L.R.Q., c. D-71)

3 Free education for part-time AEC studies was reintroduced in 2018 (CCAFE, 2017), but there has been no research on its effects.

68,000 adult students in 1992 to less than 35,000 at the turn of the 21st century (Doray and Guindon, 2016).

### ***1.1 Adult education offerings in Quebec***

Over the last few decades, the adult education and training sector has organized itself around three major axes. The first axis, community education, is primarily structured around community centres offering sociocultural training of various kinds. Community education played a very significant role, particularly in literacy, until the 1980s–1990s, when changes to public policy reduced funding. As training centres watched their credit offerings decrease, they were forced to adapt their services to the Province of Quebec's new partnership framework by working, for the most part, in the fields of literacy, immigrant settlement, French language education, cultural activities, and labour market inclusion training (Baillergeau, 2008; Doray and Simoneau, 2019). In general, these approaches follow trends that aim to stimulate social transformation (CSE, 2016).

The second axis, non-credit education, primarily meets short-term, targeted training needs for individuals, companies, and organizations. In this market, public and private agents exist side-by-side and offer training adapted to the needs of their clientele (Lorimier, 2001). Most of their clients are large companies and public organizations. Training needs expressed by these clients are generally focused on increasing organizational productivity and efficiency and less focused on meeting the needs of individuals (Bélanger and Robitaille, 2008a; Bernier, 1999). Cégeps and universities also participate in this sector, providing training to meet the needs of commercial clients, as well as broader offerings available to individuals. Partnerships between education service providers and unions, professional associations, and economic sectors with significant needs in continuing education have been established to provide customized training (Boisclair, 2009). Few of these training programs include measures to validate learning, although some lead to recognized professional certification that can replace qualifying diplomas in specific fields, including information technology (Quan et al., 2007).

The third axis, adult education for credit, is offered by private and public educational institutions recognized by Quebec's Ministry of Education<sup>4</sup> and authorized to award recognized diplomas at three levels: professional high school training provided by centres for education through professional training centres, technical education provided by cégeps, and university education in the form of undergraduate and graduate programs. These provincial education programs have the advantage of being recognized across sectors and allow students to obtain valid qualifications through initial academic training or continuing education (Laflamme, 2007).

### ***1.2 Choosing adult education for credit***

As mentioned previously, for adults looking to make a change, choosing adult education for credit can be advantageous. Community or non-credit education can offer high-quality learning environments and even support an individual's transformative reorientation process (La Belle, 1982; Mezirow and Taylor, 2009; Taylor and Cranton, 2012). However, from the perspective of professional integration, these programs do not have the same

4 Given changes made to the name of the department responsible for education in Quebec, the generic term "Ministry of Education" will be used.

recognition as diploma programs offered by recognized educational institutions. Obtaining a qualifying diploma is an important factor in reducing employment precarity for workers. Individuals without a diploma have greater difficulty entering the workforce (Bélisle and Fernandez, 2018; Gorohouna and Ris, 2017; Vultur, 2007). Furthermore, data from Quebec presented in the Labour Force Survey (Statistics Canada, 2019) for 2010 to 2019 show that unemployment rates for people without a diploma is often twice as high as for those with post-secondary degrees. For newcomers, in Quebec specifically, the deficit is even more pronounced and problems obtaining recognition for their diplomas makes it even more difficult to adequately enter the workforce. Choosing education for credit, especially for newcomers, becomes essential. To add to this, one CIRANO study shows that unemployment rates for immigrants with international post-secondary degrees, is, on average, 1.5 times higher than for those with Canadian degrees (15.1% vs. 9.7%) (Boudarbat and Connolly, 2013).

### ***1.3 Recent development of college education and training for adults***

Following 1993's Robillard reform, *cégep* adult education programs were consolidated and reviewed (MEQ, 1993). There are two kinds of credit program: diploma of college studies ("*diplôme d'études collégial*", or DEC) and attestation of college studies ("*attestation d'études collégiales*", or AEC). The DEC is the main college diploma awarded by *cégeps* since their creation in 1967. The DEC is divided into two streams. First, the university preparatory program, normally completed in two years, aims to make the transition from high school to university. This is one of the particularities of Quebec's post-secondary system. *Cégeps*, spread through every region of Quebec, provided free access to quality post-secondary education for many young and not-so-young residents, facilitating access to both the workforce and a university education in the same institution (Thériault, 2018). The second stream is the technical DEC, which aims to produce individuals qualified to join the workforce directly. These are usually three-year programs. In both cases, objectives and skills are defined by the Ministry of Education, although colleges have a certain degree of latitude in terms of including local colour and adapting programs to their context. A general education common core, required in both cases, includes courses in language and literature, second language, philosophy or humanities, and physical education. This general educational curriculum is required whether students are registered in the university preparatory or technical stream. In our estimation, it can also lead to university education. Quebec's college education system is the only free, public, post-secondary system that combines technical and university preparatory education. Regular sector DEC's are primarily designed for young people leaving high school, but are open to adults returning to school. Despite this, due to specific admission requirements for adults returning to university, few register in university preparatory programs. According to Lapointe-Therrien and Richard (2018), between 2007 and 2016, only 8.9% of registered students over 24 years of age were registered in university preparatory programs.

The second type of diploma offered by Quebec colleges is far less well known, and therefore merits a more detailed introduction. Created with the specific purpose of providing adult education and training, AEC's were linked to the second mission of the *cégep* system: continuing education. *Cégeps* were already offering many diplomas potentially of interest for adults, but in 1993, the structure of continuing education diplomas was reorganized (CSE,

2019; MEQ, 1993). The diploma of advanced college studies<sup>5</sup> (“*diplôme de perfectionnement d’enseignement collégial*”, or DPEC) and the certificate of college studies<sup>6</sup> (“*certificat d’études collégiales*”, or CEC) were eliminated and the AEC diploma, created in 1988, became the “primary credit education response offered specifically to adults” (original translation) (Bélanger and Robitaille, 2008b, p. 235). Unlike the DPEC and CEC, AEC programs are developed locally. Typically based on a DEC foundation, they can vary in terms of courses, length, and skills. Some programs are completely customized to meet local training needs, thereby coinciding with neoliberal trends and labour market principles originating in deficit reduction policies (Doray and Simoneau, 2019). In some instances, the Ministry of Education is required to authorize the development of such programs, but it is primarily the colleges that establish, within their fields of technical expertise, the nature of their programs. To support dialogue and collaboration, once institutions were authorized to create their programs, the Federation of Cégeps adopted a memorandum of understanding concerning the creation and management of AECs (“*Protocole d’entente sur l’élaboration et la gestion des AEC*”). In 2014, an AEC curriculum framework (“*Cadre d’élaboration de programmes d’études menant à une AEC*”) was added to the memorandum of understanding.

There are two kinds of AEC program. Initial education programs are often longer and aim to provide students with comprehensive training in a new field, while advanced study diplomas offer specialized training to adults who already have experience or skills in the field. Consequently, these programs have stricter admission requirements. It should also be noted that registration is limited to adults, unlike professional training programs that, since 1989, accept students from the age of 16. Normally, two basic conditions must be met to register in an AEC program: interruption of studies for at least one year and a high school diploma (*Règlement sur le régime des études collégiales*, art. 4)<sup>7</sup>. However, practically speaking, AECs often provide initial training or, for newcomers, rapid access to a Quebec diploma to help enter the workforce (Bérubé, 2007).

The rise of AECs exists in tandem with the political and economic trends of the 1990s. Deficit reduction, new market principles, and the integration of economic actors as partners in developing educational projects suggest the instrumentalization of adult education to support workforce development. Education is therefore seen as an economic, rather than social, force. Issues of personal and collective development taking shape within the fight against social inequalities and cultural development, seeking to ensure greater social and economic development during the first stage of development of adult education and training, led to significant educational reforms, but are now subjugated to companies’ economic success (Doray and Simoneau, 2019). This is also a source of tension between the regular and continuing education sectors. The regular sector, that is, general and university preparatory studies, positions itself as an advocate of a community education model insulated from market influence and in contrast to continuing education expressly

5 Diploma in technical studies (*Diplôme d’études techniques*) awarded and defined by the Department from 1984 to 1993. It was intended for those who held a CEC or technical DEC.

6 Diploma in technical studies (*Diplôme d’études techniques*) awarded and defined by the Department from 1973 to 1993. It was the equivalent of the specialized education portion of a technical DEC

7 College Education Regulations (*Règlement sur le régime des études collégiales*, or RREC), defined in the *General and Vocational Colleges Act*, is the primary regulation governing the operation of cégeps

focused on the employment market. We also note that, as with the diplomas they replace, AECs do not offer the general education common core included in university preparatory and technical DEC (s) (*Règlement sur le régime des études collégiales*, art. 6).

#### **1.4 Adults returning to school in professional and technical education**

Whether due to interruption of their initial post-secondary studies, migration, job loss, or career transition, many adults choose to return to school. Although returning to school is motivated by a variety of factors, it often occurs when a person’s linear life path is disrupted as part of a transformational process and redefinition of identity (Bélanger, 2015; Doucet and Thériault, 2019). Going back to school can take many forms, depending on a person’s aspirations, capacities, field, and context (Doray et al., 2007; Marzarte-Fricot, 2019). Choices also vary according to initial qualification level. In Quebec, adults with a high school diploma (“*diplôme d’études secondaires*”, or “DES”) have two main choices: professional and technical training and university education. This analysis focuses on the first of these.

Professional and technical training is provided by two distinct educational entities. Professional training is offered by professional education centres associated with centres for education<sup>8</sup>. These high school-level professional training programs, which vary in length from six to eighteen months, are offered in many regions of Quebec. They are generally associated with skilled trades and are based primarily on practical training to prepare students to move directly into the labour market. The entirety of the program is developed by the Ministry of Education. Technical training, on the other hand, is provided by *cégeps*, where students can obtain DEC (s) or AEC (s). DEC technical programs offer initial training over three years. Implementation can vary from college to college and include local colour, but fundamental principles and skills are defined by the Ministry of Education. According to the Federation of *Cégeps*, there are 133 technical and 350 AEC programs offered during the day and evening, full-time and part-time. Whether initial training or advanced studies, the length of these programs varies greatly, from 180 hours to over 2,300 hours. Emerging primarily from local initiatives, they are developed locally or in collaboration and can also be purchased and implemented by other *cégeps* (*Règlement sur le régime des études collégiales*, art. 16; Fédération des *cégeps*, 2014).

Choosing a program level depends on many factors. Firstly, the future student’s interest in finding a program that provides the best support, as well as their relationship to school, personal experiences, current education level, and available financial resources (Doray et al., 2012; Marzarte-Fricot, 2019). Doray et al. (2012) demonstrated that people with diplomas returning to *cégep* or university most often choose this educational trajectory. It would seem that professional training programs suffer from competition with *cégeps*’ technical training programs, which are more demanding and give access to more valued careers (Doray, 2010; Masdonati et al., 2015; Molgat et al., 2011), a gap more pronounced in women (Marchand, 2019).

#### **1.5 Choosing *cégep* as an adult**

Adults can choose to attend college and obtain qualifications recognized by the state in one of three ways. The first is regular, initial training to obtain a DEC. The second is intense

8 Previously known as school boards

technical training offered by a continuing education service. The third is an AEC program also offered by cégep continuing education services.

Registering in a regular technical DEC is the first choice. Data show that this choice is becoming more popular for many adults. While difficult to define precisely, the number of adult students in the regular sector is increasing in cégeps, thereby changing pedagogical practices and how the population is being supported (Bessette, 2000; Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (CSE), 2019; Doray, 2018; Lapointe-Therrien and Richard, 2018). Adults may perceive the possibility of being in class with young people as an obstacle to success, and may choose not to register. Adults who have already obtained a DEC or equivalent, or already completed their general education, can follow a reduced workload interspersed with breaks that allows them to maintain part-time employment without jeopardizing their success. For many adults, the accessibility of these programs is an advantage. It should be noted that admission criteria for adults can sometimes limit their choice of program. While Quebec universities have specific admission requirements for adults, the situation is different with cégeps. Admission criteria require future students to obtain high school prerequisites identified by the program, even if they hold a university degree, which completing the required adult education courses through an entry-level service called "preparation for post-secondary studies" ("préparation aux études postsecondaires" (*Régime pédagogique de la formation générale des adultes*, art. 13).

The second available option is an intensive, full-time DEC program offered by a continuing education service. Admission requirements are different. Generally, adults must hold a DEC or equivalent, or have completed eleven of fourteen general education courses. This is an intensive trajectory; its schedule does not align with regular fall and winter semesters and includes few breaks for the duration of the program. Adult students can obtain their diploma more quickly than in a regular program. However, students do not have access to all of the programs offered at Quebec's 48 cégeps. In fact, data compiled by the Federation of Cégeps' "Mon retour au cégep" ("my return to cégep") portal indicate that only 28 DEC programs are offered in 38 cégeps. These students' options are also more limited, particularly if they need to retake failed courses, but they also have the option of taking regular college courses to complete their program.

The final choice for obtaining credit is to register in a full-time or part-time AEC program, presented in the previous section.

Despite a wide variety of educational offerings, geographic accessibility, and free access for full-time students, cégeps remain poorly attended by adults, given the demand. Nearly one in five students registered in technical programs have done so in the continuing education sector. According to public data from the Databank of Official Statistics on Québec (ISQ, 2022), at the beginning of the 2019–2020 school year, Quebec colleges had 165,367 students in regular programs and 29,583 (15%) in continuing education, including 194,950 students at public institutions. In the technical sector, there was a total of 101,614 students, of which 78,890 were in regular programs and 22,724 in continuing education (22%). These numbers pale in comparison to those before the 1993 reform and the current presence of adults in community colleges outside of Quebec. Toronto's three community colleges alone welcomed more than 50,000 adults into their continuing education programs each year during the 2000s (Bélanger and Robitaille, 2008b).

Choices adults make about college education are both open and complex. As Bélanger and Robitaille (2008b) note, the number of obstacles to entry can be discouraging, as can



financing, including the student loan system, whose impact on adults we will not explore here. Once the choice has been made and barriers to entry overcome, the question of educational model remains. How do these adults organize and think about their education journey? We believe this question is essential to understanding how these educational programs are structured around adult students.

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