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Major Reforms Bring Brighter Employment Prospects for Quebec Students

Abstract

With the 1986 plan of action for vocational education, the ministère de l'Éducation launched a major reform of the secondary vocational education system. The author examines the current state of vocational education as a result of the changes ensuing from the reform, and addresses the particular challenges faced in providing equal access and quality in English-language vocational education. The paper closes with a discussion of the Ministère's current focus on creating an integrated secondary and college delivery system and on widening access to life-long learning.

Résumé

En adoptant en 1986 son plan d'action sur la formation professionnell, le ministère de l'Éducation a entamé une profonde réforme du système de la formation professionnell au secondaire. L'auteur analyse la situation actuelle dela formation professionnell qui découle de la réforme entreprise et s'intéresse au difficultés particulières que posent l'égalité d'accès et la qualité de la formation professionnell en langue anglaise. Elle termine son article par une analyse du projet, entrepris par le ministère de création d'un système d'éducation secondaire et collégial intégré et d'élargissement l'accès à l'éducation permanente.

When Québec school boards greeted a new contingent of students in September 1986, they also greeted the start of sweeping reforms to vocational and technical education in Québec. The decision to carry out such a major reform stemmed from the realization that the vocational education system then in existence was unable to meet the requirements of business and industry in the context of free trade and market globalization. Today's businesses demand higher basic qualifications and continual employee upgrading.

Main goals of the reform

The prime objective of the 1986 plan of action for vocational education was to ensure that job seekers had the skills employers required. The plan was created after an extensive consultation with the

education and business communities. Particularly valuable input was gathered regarding the impact of technological changes. The orientation document entitled *Investing in Competence: Ministerial Orientations and Actions in Vocational and Technical Education* summarizes the resulting partnership role the Ministère defined for itself: "Between 1991 and 1996, Québec small and medium-sized businesses will have invested 2.3 billion dollars to acquire new technology, in an effort to increase productivity. Although everyone has access to the same equipment, what makes the difference for a business is the quality of its employees. The concept is thus patently clear: skilled human resources constitute the best investment."¹ A way had to be found to continually reflect technological, scientific, and socio-economic changes in educational programs. A five-year reform plan was launched in 1987, and the pace has quickened ever since.

Another imperative identified in the consultation was the need to improve the quality of student performance in a core of academic subjects (mother tongue, second language, and mathematics). It was argued that with a stronger academic preparation, employees would be better able to assimilate the content of the new vocational education programs and adapt more successfully to the workplace.

Representatives of business and industry also identified the personal qualities they sought in employees and urged educators to design programs which also address this developmental aspect. Preparing students personally and technically to meet these workplace demands established a "total quality" focus for the educational reform.

A new organizational structure adapted to current needs

With a clear mandate, the 1987 plan of action set out to restructure the entire secondary school vocational education system. Québec now has 131 programs leading to the Secondary School Vocational Diploma (SSVD) or *Diplôme d'études professionnelles (DEP)*, as it is known in French. The programs vary from 600 to 1,800 hours in duration, spread over one or two years. An additional thirty-eight advanced specialty programs lead to an Attestation of Vocational Specialization (AVS) or *Attestation de spécialisation professionnelle (ASP)*. The duration of these programs varies from several months to one year. There are also short-term, non-credit courses which are financed by businesses and customized to meet their specific needs.

Higher admission standards reflect the Ministère's commitment to raising the profile of technical training. Young applicants are urged to obtain a Secondary V diploma, or as a minimum, to complete Secondary IV courses in core prerequisites. Minimal admission requirements vary from program to program, however, and admission to some is possible

with the completion of Secondary III core subjects. Weaker students, who were traditionally accommodated in pre-1986 vocational programs, are now being assisted through other programs in the youth sector. It is believed that more focused academic upgrading, work-study, or technology-oriented teaching of regular academic subjects offer these students a more realistic preparation for the demands of today's workplace than the old short and long vocational programs could.

Although increased effort is being directed to attracting young people directly from secondary school, mature applicants continue to form the majority of interested candidates. Consequently, admission criteria have also been broadened to accommodate those who are already in the work force or who are returning to school with experiential learning. A system of five categories of prerequisites and the recognition of prior learning acquired outside formal schooling allows fairer access for Québec's diverse clientele.

As another means of ensuring that vocational education is more accessible, programs are now being offered year-round, days or evenings, or in intensive sessions. A modular structure now makes it possible for individuals to upgrade specific skills by choosing to complete only relevant modules. School boards are also offering human resource development services to businesses. The businesses that take advantage of this training are eligible for a business-tax credit.

A winning formula: Partnerships between education, business, and industry

From its inception, the reform of vocational education in Québec has considered partnership with business and industry to be fundamental to ensuring the success of the plan. By 1992, 1,800 people from various sectors of the labour market had contributed to the programs at one stage or another in the development process.² Partnership and collaboration have become key concepts in vocational education and manpower training. There is ongoing collaboration between the Ministère and other government ministries concerned with manpower and labour. Another significant partner in ongoing reform is the *Société québécoise de développement de la main-d'oeuvre*, founded in 1993. Regional and provincial committees representing education, business, and industry now meet regularly to anticipate future needs and determine training priorities.

In 1990-91, as a means of strengthening the links to the workplace, the Ministère de l'Éducation announced the creation of sector-based centres of excellence. The structure of the centres provides for the active participation of industry in the management, development, and imple-

mentation of training programs – a concept that is still relatively new in Québec and Canada. These dedicated centres are sector-based trade schools or multisectorial regional or supraregional centres. The fields they serve include aerospace technology, construction, plastics manufacturing, metallurgical technology, clothing production, furniture making, flat glass manufacturing, and automobile mechanics.

To ensure that top quality centres and equipment are the norm, the number of provincial authorizations to offer secondary programs has been reduced and extensive renovations have been financed. In 1992-93 alone, \$145 million dollars was allotted for renovations and approximately \$19 million contributed to technological upgrading and equipment replacement.³ Investment in human resources has also been extensive, with in-service activities involving an average of 2,500 teachers each year.⁴

Whether in the specialized centres, or in other centres around the province, 75 percent of the education that students receive is now either in school settings that more closely reflect the layout and operation of the workplace, or in actual work-study placements. As of 1994, pilot programs in the Food Services sector are initiating redesigned apprenticeship models that will eventually be available in numerous sectors.

Current concerns

Despite a near-decade of impressive accomplishments, Québec's vocational education system continues to face challenges in 1994. Young people still tend not to enter vocational programs directly from high school, despite the advantages of acquiring these entry skills in today's competitive employment market. In 1991, three out of five students in vocational education were over the age of 20; 27 percent ranged in age from 21 to 30 years of age, and approximately one-third were over 30 years of age.⁵ For many individuals, this delayed choice can be personally costly in terms of career frustration and under-employment. For society, it could lead to a shortage of skilled labour in key sectors.

The dropout rate from vocational programs at both the secondary and college levels is also a concern, since too large a proportion of today's workforce remains inadequately trained to meet increasingly sophisticated employment demands. Both these concerns are being addressed in actions undertaken in 1993.

The next response phase: Harmonization at the secondary and college levels

The 1993 document entitled *Investing in Competence: Ministerial Orientations and Actions in Vocational and Technical Education* sets the

direction for future development by reiterating three major orientations: ongoing cooperation with all socio-economic partners, improved access to vocational and technical education, and the harmonization of secondary and college-level programs. Achieving the third aim was streamlined with the merger of the two education ministries: the ministère de l'Éducation (primary and secondary education) and the ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Science (postsecondary education). This structural change provided additional impetus for the vocational education harmonization plan launched the same year.

Work is currently underway to ensure that secondary and college programs in various sectors are more complementary and allow individuals to access continuous learning as efficiently as possible. School boards and colleges are concluding agreements to achieve these goals and to share facilities and equipment. It is anticipated that an integrated distribution of programs (or *carte des enseignements*, as it is known in French) for both levels could be achieved by 1997.

A development plan for English-language vocational education

As the vocational education reform takes shape across Québec, the goal of providing high quality, accessible education with a broad curriculum, in English as well as in French, has presented unique difficulties. In 1991-92, of the more than 125,000 students enrolled in vocational courses, a little less than 4,400 students were enrolled in programs in English. Almost 40 percent of those students were registered in a single sector, secretarial or accounting studies, and some 73 percent were attending institutions in the Montréal area.⁶

The remaining twenty-seven percent of the English-speaking clientele outside of the Montréal area is widely dispersed throughout the province. The school boards mandated to provide English services may cover wide geographical territories which present logistical and financial constraints for centres and clients alike. In the demanding context of continual, fast-paced change, the provision of programs, evaluation tools, and in-service sessions in the minority language has lagged behind French sector developments. Misconceptions and cultural factors also appear to contribute to an enrollment rate that still falls short of expectations. A vicious cycle has ensued, in which the viability of course development and technical upgrading depends on adequate enrollments; yet attracting sufficient enrollments depends on offering an adequate array of options.

To address these issues, the school boards involved formed the English Language Vocational Education Council (ELVEC) in 1992. The Ministère, for its part, established a consultative committee to meet regularly with ELVEC representatives. In 1994, a provincial development plan for English-language vocational education was established. In

accordance with the global orientations, the plan identifies certain boards as sectorial centres for English-language programs and supports the principle of bilingual centres and services in the major provincial or sectorial centres serving predominantly French-speaking clientele in order to make vocational career options more accessible to all Québécois.

In 1992, eighteen (18) school boards were authorized to offer 43 programs in English, covering 16 of the existing 23 employment sectors. Two years later, the number of authorizations was extended to include 57 programs, and capital and equipment investment has resulted in a major upgrading of several centres.

School boards have also increased their efforts to promote vocational education as a winning career option. Two symposiums were held in 1991 and 1993 to inform educators of these major reforms and of the enhanced career prospects available to young people. A third symposium planned for 1995 will continue the effort to alter misperceptions about vocational education and will showcase the broadened career opportunities Québec's businesses and industry can offer the highly-skilled vocational graduate.

Conclusion

A perusal of current literature, or even passing attention to current news reports or local events, confirms that Québec's ongoing efforts to respond to new socio-economic imperatives are part of a global phenomenon reshaping educational systems worldwide. As these new educational structures evolve both inside Québec and elsewhere, vocational education is also evolving as a vital component of the lifelong learning process.

NOTES

1. Québec, ministère de l'Éducation, *Investing in competence: Ministerial orientations and actions in vocational and technical education*, Code 17-9913A (Québec: ministère de l'Éducation, 1993) p. 7.
2. Québec, ministère de l'Éducation, *Education Express* (Québec: ministère de l'Éducation, January 1992) p. 6.
3. Québec, ministère de l'Éducation, Direction générale de la formation professionnelle, *Principales statistiques sur la formation professionnelle* (Québec: ministère de l'Éducation, February 9, 1993).
4. Québec, ministère de l'Éducation, *Education Express* (Québec: ministère de l'Éducation, January 1992) p. 6.
5. *Investing in competence* (see Note 1).
6. Québec, ministère de l'Éducation, *Plan de développement...* (Québec: ministère de l'Éducation, 19), p. 7.

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