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## **Exploding Myths about Vocational Education**

### **Abstract**

*Ten "myths" or misunderstandings of the state of vocational education (VE) in Quebec are identified and debunked. It is argued that VE in the province is poorly understood by both educators and potential students; it is claimed to enhance the employability of a broad range of students and is not provided only for "poor academic achievers." VE is proposed as a viable option for anyone who seeks occupationally oriented training.*

### **Résumé**

*L'auteur dénombre et démystifie dix fausses conceptions ou malentendus relatifs à l'état de la formation professionnelle de langue anglaise au Québec. Les éducateurs et les étudiants potentiels, soutiennent, ont une mauvaise compréhension de l'enseignement professionnel au Québec; cet enseignement améliorerait l'employabilité de nombreuses catégories d'étudiants et pas seulement celle des étudiants qui ont de mauvais résultats. La formation professionnelle est présentée comme une option viable pour quiconque souhaite acquérir une formation à orientation professionnelle.*

In this paper, I will discuss the "culture" of vocational education and, in particular, the myths associated with vocational education. I am defining "myth" as a belief or a system of beliefs, whose truths are accepted uncritically. It is not the purpose of this paper to review **all** of the myths associated with the culture of vocational education, but instead the focus will be on only the more obvious ones. In addition to exposing these myths, I will also point out some of the recent corrective changes that have occurred in vocational education and have contributed to the invalidation of these myths. My goal, in this paper, is two-fold. First, I wish to contribute to the further invalidation of these myths by presenting opposing evidence and, second, I would like to create a new idea to take the place of these myths. The idea must be a positive one that can be utilized within the educational milieu to promote the revived and renewed culture of vocational education in Quebec.

## Ten Myths of Vocational Education

There are ten common (and detrimental) myths of vocational education. It may be interesting to educators to see how much they may have contributed to their existence and promotion. Before we can change the perception of vocational education in the general society, however, we may as teachers and counsellors need to change our own perception of it.

### ***Myth one: Educators are well-informed about vocational education***

Perhaps one of the biggest problems in supporting vocational education as a viable option is that counsellors and educators are not sufficiently well enough informed themselves to be able to inform potential candidates for the programs. For example, how many of us are aware that there are now over 60 English-sector vocational education programs available within 17 occupational sectors in Quebec? In the French sector there are more than double that number. The English-sector occupational training programs are offered at 19 school boards and 42 training centers spread through eight regions of the province. How many of us can honestly say that we know where those regions and programs are? Do we know how to help students obtain the necessary prerequisites for the program?

Teachers and counsellors who wish to become informed in this area should know that the Quebec Advisor Committee on English-Language Vocational Education (QACVE, 1994) produces an English-language chart which lists programs, school boards, locations, and contact people for all the vocational education programs in the province. QACVE produced this chart as an information service and has been circulating it throughout the English-speaking community.

### ***Myth two: Potential clients are also well informed about vocational education***

QACVE recently conducted a survey of Quebec students at the third, fourth, and fifth secondary levels (QACVE, 1990). It was discovered that 75 percent of the students were unaware of the fact that vocational education is now offering a new range of programs which train people professionally for trades to which they had access, and for which they were qualified to enter. In a follow-up study (QACVE, 1991), it was found that among those who actually were aware, most only knew about the programs which were offered within their own school or school boards.

***Myth three: Vocational education is for dropouts***

In this area the statement is both true and false, but not in the way most people might at first think. A recent phenomenon of vocational education is that it has started to attract a very large number of CEGEP dropouts. So the answer to this myth is, "Yes, vocational education is for dropouts, but not the dropouts we were considering ten years ago. The new dropouts enrolled in vocational education are students who have gone on the CEGEP track and have discovered, for one reason or another, that this type of study is not for them, and what they are really looking for is employability."

But, I would also have to say that vocational education is **not** for dropouts in the sense that vocational education now has the highest retention rate of students among secondary schools, CEGEPs, and universities. The average dropout rate from the vocational education program is in the range of 15 to 17 percent as compared to 30 percent or more in the general education sector (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1988).

***Myth four: Vocational education is for poor academic achievers***

This myth is an old one, but a "killer"; it holds that vocational education is only for those who perform poorly in the academic milieu. This is a myth that is changing slowly, but it **is** changing. Of the Quebec students registered in vocational education in 1991-92, 15 percent of them were at the grade ten level and 53 percent had their secondary school-leaving or equivalent diploma (Ministère de l'Éducation, 1991). An increasing percentage of vocational education students consists of adults, many of them being recent immigrants to the province. Current estimates indicate that students educated outside Quebec make up about 16 percent of the vocational education population; this percentage is even higher in the urban centers. The adult vocational education students have an average of 14 years of school, and many even have university degrees. Several such examples from vocational education programs can be cited, one of them being the electro-mechanics program, one of the many "high-tech" training programs which attract immigrants who in their country-of-origin had completed training as professionals, but whose credentials are not acceptable to the Quebec corporations which govern certification. Vocational education programs greatly increase the "employability" of such individuals.

The remaining myths particularly address this notion of employability. Perhaps what has **really** changed regarding vocational education

is: vocational education programs have shown striking progress in improving employment prospects of their graduates relative to other types of degree-granting educational programs.

***Myth five: Vocational education is a dead-end choice***

How many of us are aware of the fact that the completion of certification in vocational studies (*Diplôme d'études professionnelles* or DEP) is an acceptable entry qualification for general education programs in the CEGEP? How many of us make it a practice to inform secondary students and their parents of this option? How many of us are aware of the fact that completing a DEP plus secondary-five English and French credits will also yield a high school leaving certificate (*Diplôme d'études secondaires*)? This is important information to give to students because, in an exceptional case, someone at the secondary-four level could actually opt into a DEP program, declare themselves an adult, follow the DEP program, and then follow secondary-five English and French courses. Thus, in the end they could possibly meet the requirements for **both** secondary and vocational certification in their fifth year of secondary education.

***Myth six: Vocational education does not provide employable skills***

It is a fact that vocational education programs currently offered in the DEP prepare candidates for 16 of the top 20 occupations in greatest demand (Canadian Occupational Projection System, 1987). In rank order from greater to lesser demand for the period 1986-1995, the occupations include 1) graduate nurses and related; 2) sales clerks; 3) waiters and hosts; 4) secretaries and stenographers; 5) janitors and cleaners; 6) book-keepers; 7) chefs and cooks; 8) child-care workers; 9) cashiers; 10) truck drivers; 11) farmers; 12) sales managers; 13) office workers; 14) stitchers; 15) barbers and hairdressers; 17) motor vehicle mechanics; 18) guards and watchmen; 19) receptionists; and 20) typists and clerk-typists. Not only that, but out of the 60-plus available vocational education programs, well over 30 provide training for programs presently identified by Employment and Immigration Canada as "in demand" within the labour market (Ministère de l'éducation, 1992).

***Myth seven: Once anyone completes secondary four or five, CEGEP is the only logical choice***

If the goal for one's education is to train for employment, the choice is not so obvious. By contrast, those students who are enrolled in pre-university CEGEP programs, from which there is the largest drop-

out rate, are actually **less** employable than graduates of vocational programs. That is to say, they have a lower employability rate. In fact, a CEGEP diploma (*Diplôme d'études collégial*) in general programs provides no greater employability than a high school leaving certificate (*Diplôme d'études secondaire*) (Ministère de l'éducation, 1992).

***Myth eight: The higher your level of completed education, the greater your chances are of obtaining work***

This is the famous “parent” myth, which was dispelled by a study conducted by Employment and Immigration Canada through the Canadian Occupational Projection System (COPS, 1987). This study discovered that the opposite was true. It was shown that, of the vocational education graduates, 85 percent become employed. With other degrees, however, the number drops substantially to only 65 percent for CEGEP graduates, 61 percent for bachelor's graduates, 55 percent for master's, and up to 75 percent for doctorates. Two years later, in 1989, COPS did a follow-up survey and found that these figures had remained fairly stable. Of the vocational education graduates, 71 percent were still employed, while only 57 percent of the CEGEP graduates, 55 percent of the bachelor's, and only 51 percent of the holders of master's and doctoral degrees were still employed (Statistics Canada, 1989) .

***Myth nine: Students do not want to travel to attend vocational education programs***

This is what could be called an “educator” myth. A province-wide survey conducted by QACVE showed that 58% of the students surveyed indicated an interest in travel for vocational programs; this figure rose to 62% in the rural areas (QACVE, 1991). These rural students are those who would most need to travel to obtain vocational education. Therefore, it would appear that students **are** willing to travel to attend adult vocational programs.

***Myth ten: Vocational education is for the uneducable, the unmotivated, and the unambitious***

I call this the “general” myth. After reviewing a variety of such lists, I have found that the common elements that prospective employers in business and industry now seek in candidates have four sets of key characteristics. First, they seek recruits who have a good general education coupled with strong interpersonal skills. Second, they seek candidates who show a strong interest and aptitude in their chosen field of training and work. Third, they seek employees who are self-starters and who are highly motivated to learn, practice, and succeed in their field.

Fourth, they seek applicants who are seeking to implement their first choice for a job rather than an alternative or "fall-back" choice. Because of a competency-based curriculum and the high correlation between training and employment these four characteristics are typical of vocational education graduates, while they are often missing from graduates of other degree routes.

### **Why these Myths? And a New Idea!**

Why have these myths survived? One of the major factors that has contributed to the perpetuation of these myths is our distorted perception of technology. Our problem with vocational education arises out of our misunderstanding of what technology is and has become. Technology has drastically changed over the past few decades. Many still view technology in the context of a traditional industrialized society, but technology has changed greatly as the nature of our post-industrial society has changed. Proponents of today's vocational education attempt not only to address these concerns, but also to keep pace with rapidly changing technology.

In closing, I would propose a new idea, i. e., that vocational education has become a successful pre-employment training system. In addition, that a students' decision to further their education in a vocational stream has become a "free occupational choice," rather than a "forced" academic consequence. In fact, vocational education is a viable **first** choice for people as early as high school. I would conclude that in a society and time when employment and self-fulfillment are critical goals, vocational education is a viable first choice for anyone to make.

### **NOTE**

This is an adaptation of an address on vocational education delivered to English-language educators and counsellors from across Québec at *Symposium II: Vocational Education Career Paths: Obstacles and Opportunities* at Le Nouvel Hôtel, Montreal, January 22, 1993.

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