

Barriers to Accessing Quebec College Education: What can be Learned from Allophones from Recent Immigrant Backgrounds?

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This article features results from a research project aimed at identifying institutional barriers to accessing college education for allophones from recent immigrant backgrounds with a view to proposing new ways of promoting their access.

For further details, please consult: Doutreloux, E. (2023, to be published). Discrimination systémique à l'enseignement supérieur collégial : une grille d'analyse pour modifier les pratiques institutionnelles. *Revue ERADE. Enseignement et recherche en administration de l'éducation*.

Background

Persistent Challenges for Access to Higher Education in the Province of Québec

In 1964, the Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education published its flagship report, the Parent Report, which vehemently denounced inequalities in access to higher education in the province of Québec. Strongly motivated by principles of equity and social justice, the Commission's recommendations led to the creation of CEGEPs so that anyone wishing to pursue their studies could do so, regardless of their origin (Royal Commission of Inquiry on Education in the Province of Québec, 2004).

Although such unprecedented access to higher education has benefited women, French speakers and people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Eckert, 2010), several research studies have shown that social inequalities in access to higher education still

persist today, and that the efforts made have not removed the mechanisms of systemic discrimination that particularly affect minority and marginalized groups in education (Ratel & Pilote, 2017; Kamanzi, Goastellec & Picard, 2017).

In this respect, allophones from recent immigrant backgrounds are at a disadvantage compared to their fellow citizens from majority groups when considering a pre-university or technical college program, as they are at the intersection of three forms of categorization: being from an immigrant background, not having been schooled in the language of the host society and having just recently started life in a new society.

Key Concept

What is Meant by Equal Access?

In the literature, there are several types of equalities included in the concept of “equality of educational opportunity”: equality of access, equality of achievement, equality of results and equality of treatment (Doutreloux, 2020). Our research project challenges the concept related to equality of access, which refers to a situation where all individuals have the same opportunities to access services in a given education system (Conseil supérieur de l’éducation, 2016). Equality of access aims to guarantee the right to education, regardless of tuition fees, or individual or family circumstances (Verhoeven, Orianne & Dupriez, 2007). This presupposes access to information as well as geographic and physical access to an educational institution (Legendre, 2005). Equality of access is the mother of all types of equalities when it comes to school (Dupriez & Verhoeven, 2006).

Methodology

Discriminated People's Experience as a Starting Point

- 🔍 Type of research: Qualitative participatory action research
- 👤 Study population: Allophones from recent immigrant backgrounds and personnel involved in the chain of services designed for them.
- 📍 Place and period of research: Cégep de l'Outaouais, between 2017 and 2020

In addition to identifying institutional barriers to accessing college education, our work aimed to give a voice to people who have historically been less heard, from an emancipatory perspective.

We conducted a multi-case study along with ten semi-structured interviews. We used a closed thematic analysis to highlight the four categories of institutional barriers theorized by Cross (1981): those related to the programs, policies, procedures and practices that govern the teaching environment. The whole process was validated by the allophones who participated in the research.



Results

Institutional Barriers to College Education

1

Problematic aspects concerning access to college education for allophones from recent immigrant backgrounds have been identified in: 1) programs, 2) policies, 3) practices and 4) procedures that govern the college teaching environment.

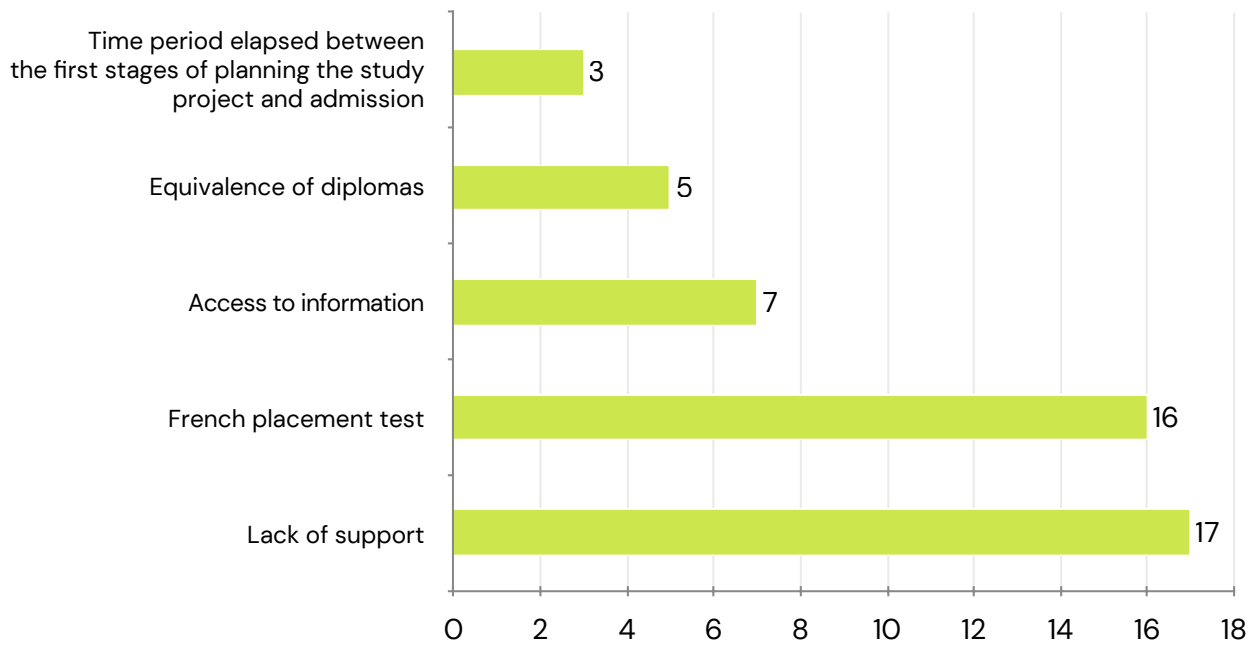
Two main (1) program-related barriers emerged: the lack of flexibility in recognizing courses completed outside the province of Québec and the frequent cancellation of the French language improvement course that is part of the Springboard to a DCS Pathway. Regarding (2) policies, irritants include the high cost of translations and the French placement test¹. In terms of (3) existing practices, the main problems identified were the location of the French placement test and the lack of support in the admissions process. Finally, (4) on procedures, we noted difficulties related to the length of the admissions process, access to the documentation required to complete the process (transcripts, diplomas, course and program descriptions), and access to information on the program, tests and requirements.

¹ As is the case with other institutions in the college network, the Cégep de l'Outaouais requires a French placement test for allophone applicants who have completed the equivalent of a high school diploma (DES) in a non-French-speaking school. A minimum entry threshold is set locally.

2

Taking all categories of institutional barriers into account, five have proven to be more significant for allophones.

Figure 1
Main Institutional Barriers to Accessing College Education for Allophones from Recent Immigrant Backgrounds



Source: Doutreloux, E. (2020). *Égalité d'accès à l'enseignement collégial : le cas des allophones issus de l'immigration récente étudié par une équipe de recherche-action participative* [Doctoral dissertation, Université de Sherbrooke].

3

The most common barrier is lack of support.

Participants reported that they needed support before and during the admissions process. We are referring here to the lack of support in administrative procedures, and the lack of information and guidance provided to students by CEGEP services, particularly with regard to placement tests and program requirements. As far as the French placement test is concerned, many reported the effects of downgrading, difficult test-taking conditions and the stress associated with the test. The results also highlighted major problems related to access to information, the process of having diplomas obtained outside the country recognized, and finally, the time period elapsed between the first stages of planning the study project and admission.

What Can we Learn from our Results?

Walking the Talk

1

Educational institutions stand to benefit from findings of this research and from making changes to their policies with a view to improving access for allophones from recent immigrant backgrounds.

Eager for suggestions on how to make its practices more equitable and inclusive, the Cégep de l'Outaouais' Academic Council, advised by the Director of Studies Office, the Springboard to a DCS Pathway Committee and the French departmental assembly, made changes to its policies as a result of our research.

Two amendments were made:

- Amendment to the Procédures relatives à l'admission et à l'inscription dans un programme menant à un diplôme d'études collégiales: change in the minimum threshold for passing the French placement test for allophones resulting in a modulated and more realistic minimum threshold.
- Amendment to the Règlement relatif à l'admission et à l'inscription dans un programme d'études collégiales: addition made to take into account all concepts encompassing equality of access as defined in the Québec *Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms* (2019c).

2

The identification of institutional barriers to accessing college education affecting vulnerable student populations can be achieved through a review of procedures.

Following on from our research, an analysis grid was designed as a tool for examining procedures. This grid is intended for higher education personnel.

It is suggested to carry out an analysis of practices based on each of the grid's categories. To optimize the results, this analysis should be carried out by a committee representing the diversity of the student population with a view to ensuring multiple points of view.

Table 1
Analysis Grid for Identifying Institutional Barriers to Accessing College Education

Programs	Policies	Practices	Procedures
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offering • Choice • Schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic factors (costs involved for placement tests and translations) • Provincial requirements • Local requirements (evaluation and classification) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geographical location • Transport availability • Support measures (before and during the process) • Welcoming measures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required documentation • Admissions and registration process • Access to information

Source: Inspired by Cross (1981). *Adults as Learners*. Jossey-Bass.

3

Participation in the research project enabled allophones to assert a greater sense of empowerment.

The leading role played by allophones in the various stages of the research generated a feeling of demarginalization (Mayoux, 1998). They emphasized their sense of power and influence over situations they previously had no control over.

Courses of Action

- ✓ Organize information on the admissions process by redesigning the institutional websites and producing material including visuals to aid understanding.
- ✓ Reassess the relevance and effectiveness of French placement tests, and modify entry threshold levels if necessary.
- ✓ Create links with external partners (French as a second language schools, etc.) as a means to showcase the opportunities offered by CEGEPs (regular and continuing education) and harmonize the course offering for allophones.
- ✓ Integrate services for allophones into a one-stop-shop project for students.

Lines of Research

- ✓ Study remaining categories for “barriers to academic training” as theorized by Cross (1981):
 - ✓ Situational barriers: refer to everyday situations and factors linked to the person’s immediate physical and social environment, such as the economy, culture and family structure.
 - ✓ Dispositional barriers: linked to attitudes, beliefs and knowledge that an individual has about education and learning as they relate to the individual’s values and self-perception as a learner.
- ✓ Study the other types of equalities included in the concept of equality of educational opportunity: equality of achievement, equality of results and equality of treatment.

For Further Reading

Doutreloux, E. (2023, to be published). Discrimination systémique à l'enseignement supérieur collégial : une grille d'analyse pour modifier les pratiques institutionnelles. *Revue ERADE. Enseignement et recherche en administration de l'éducation*.

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To cite this article

Doutreloux, E. (2023). Barriers to Accessing College Education: What can be Learned from Allophones from Recent Immigrant Backgrounds? *Relais. The Popular Scientific Journal on Success in Higher Education*, 2.



Biographical Note

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Over the years, she has acquired expertise in issues of equality of opportunity, equity, discrimination and inclusion, which has led her to collaborate with a number of research centres, observatories, associations, ministries and higher education institutions. She currently sits on the Commission de l'enseignement et de la recherche au collégial of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation.

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Observatoire
sur la réussite
en enseignement
supérieur

Relais. The Popular Scientific Journal on Success in Higher Education

Editor: Karine Vieux-Fort

Editorial Committee: Karine Vieux-Fort, Anouk Lavoie-Isebaert
and Amélie Descheneau-Guay

Linguistic Review: Sandrine Bourget-Lapointe

Graphic Design: Gabriel Pelletier

Legal Deposit – Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec,
Library and Archives Canada, 2024

ISSN 2817-2817

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This document was produced with the financial support of the
Gouvernement du Québec, under the Canada-Québec Agreement.