Diversity of University Pathways and Well-Being in Indigenous Contexts

Jean-Luc Ratel

Ph.D.

Research professional and lecturer in the Department of Foundations and Practices in Education, Faculty of Education, Université Laval

Lecturer in the Department of Special Education and Training, Faculty of Education, Université du Québec à Montréal

This article features results from a research project aimed at better understanding the university pathways of Indigenous students and the meaning they give to them.

For further details, please consult:
Ratel, J.-L. (2019). *Du projet d'études au projet de vie : une analyse des parcours universitaires chez les étudiants des Premières Nations du Québec* [Doctoral dissertation, Université Laval]. Corpus.

Background

Inequalities that Persist Despite Steady Progress

Despite advances in post-secondary attendance among First Peoples in Québec, inequalities remain upstream, with often alarming high school dropout rates, and downstream, with still worrying graduation rates in CEGEPs and especially in universities. In Canada, beginning in the nineteenth century, elementary and high school education developed mainly around the residential school model aimed at distancing Indigenous students from their cultures and families with an overtly assimilationist objective. In this view, university graduation led to the loss of «Indian status» and subsequent exclusion from the community.

With the movement to take charge of education that began in the wake of the paper entitled *Indian Control of Indian Education* (National Indian Brotherhood, 1972), post-secondary institutions gradually became aware of the critical need for culturally relevant training and services for Indigenous student populations. While the findings and recommendations of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples of 1996 regarding this offering remain relevant,

the development of courses, programs and services specifically targeting Indigenous peoples has continued unevenly across institutions (Ratel, Bacon & Pilote, 2021), *de facto* limiting access to culturally relevant offerings.

Key Concept

Life Project: Studying for Oneself and One's Community

I was inspired by Canadian anthropologist Mario Blaser's life project concept (2004) in analyzing the meaning given by First Nations[1] student populations to their study projects, with a focus on well-being in an Indigenous environment. This concept is meant as a criticism of the strictly economic development generally promoted by the State and markets in order to rather embrace the improvement of well-being in the local community, a goal more in line with the nature of the students' projects. According to Blaser, life projects are distinguished from development in the economic sense by their attention to the uniqueness of people's experiences of place and self and by their rejection of visions that claim to be universal (Blaser, 2004). However, the inclusion of projects developed beyond the community of origin has led me to propose a broader interpretation of this concept that includes the Indigenous community at different scales (including the local community, other communities, and the urban environment) (Ratel, 2019).

---

1 In the Canadian context, the Indigenous population is made up of First Peoples, which include First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples.

Methodology

Exploring the Social Worlds of Indigenous Students

🔍 Type of research: Qualitative

👤 Study population: 23 First Nations students and graduates who attended a university in Québec. Complementary interviews were conducted with 11 Indigenous and non-Indigenous professionals working with students.

📍 Place and period of research: between 2010 and 2012 on various university campuses in Québec

The people interviewed in this research represent a diversity of profiles in terms of communities of origin, languages, genders and occupations. The interviews conducted are part of the life story method, allowing us to better understand the participants' «social worlds» (Bertaux, 2010). The qualitative analysis followed the three streams of Miles & Huberman (2003) (data condensation, data display, conclusion drawing/verification) based on a thematic analysis of interview transcripts.

Results

From Individual Study Project to Collective Life Project

1 The curricula chosen are mainly in fields that are rooted in the needs expressed by the communities.

The curricula of the interviewed sample are mainly related to the training of teachers (educational sciences) and administrative personnel (administrative sciences). Since the movement to take charge of education and services provided in communities, these two fields of study have attracted many students who want to work in schools and services in their communities.

In addition, the students interviewed were also involved in other fields: just under half studied in humanities and social sciences, and in arts, literature and communication.

Although some universities offer off–campus training in partnership with Indigenous communities, the Indigenous student population interviewed primarily attended on–campus programs.

Figure 1.
Distribution of Fields of Study

Educational sciences
n=4

Management
sciences
n=13

Arts, literature
and communication
n=8

Humanities and
social sciences
n=10
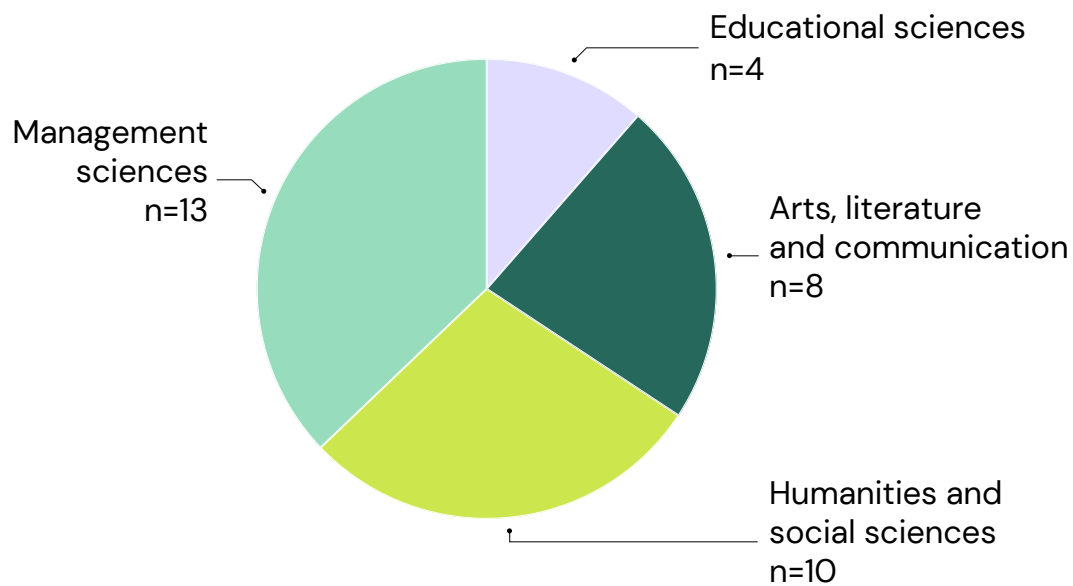
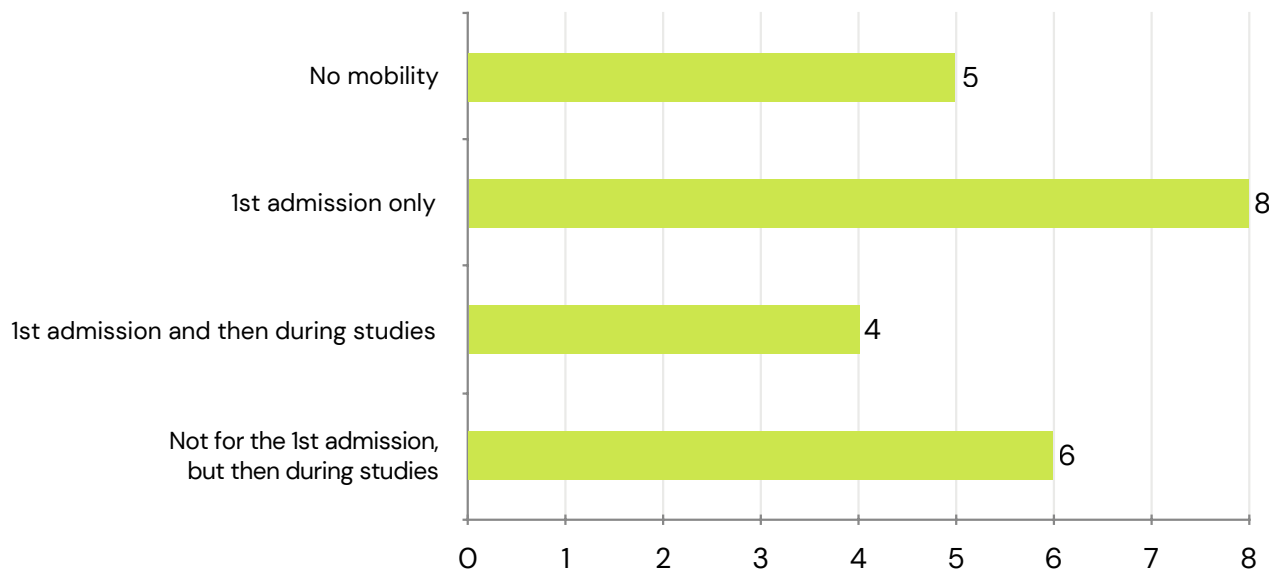NB More than one field is possible for the same participant.

Source: Ratel, J.–L. (2019). *Du projet d'études au projet de vie : une analyse des parcours universitaires chez les étudiants des Premières Nations du Québec* [Doctoral dissertation, Université Laval]. Corpus.

2 The majority of students continued their studies outside of their communities.

Some individuals were able to complete a few courses in their communities, which promotes geographic access to education and cultural safety (Dufour, 2015). However, most of them had to continue part of their academic training on campus, forcing them to leave their communities for their studies.

Figure 2.
Geographic Mobility Related to University Studies

Source: Ratel, J.-L. (2019). *Du projet d'études au projet de vie : une analyse des parcours universitaires chez les étudiants des Premières Nations du Québec* [Doctoral dissertation, Université Laval]. Corpus.

3 Balancing school and family poses major challenges for students, most of whom are parents when they enter university.

The profile of research participants closely corresponds to that of Indigenous students (Ratel, Bacon & Pilote, 2021), i.e. mothers returning to school after working in their communities. In this context, university studies involve major challenges related to parental responsibilities in terms of time management and which can also lead to geographic mobility for children to pursue their own education. However, despite such a high representation, it is also noticeable, especially among first-generation students[2], that many are younger, have a linear education and have no children.

4 Most students are looking to combine their individual study projects with a collective project aimed at well-being in an Indigenous environment.

These research participants' study projects were often rooted in the community of origin, which corresponds to the model often expected of the graduate returning to contribute to the development of their community. Other participants reported taking on projects that involved another community (from their own nation or another nation altogether) or Indigenous peoples in an urban environment. It is important to note that these projects taking place in different geographical locations remind us that the territories inhabited by Indigenous peoples have never been limited to the boundaries of communities defined by laws and treaties. Finally, some projects were not anchored in a territory *a priori*, for example when they involved the promotion of Indigenous cultures or the pursuit of research in an Indigenous environment.

---

2 First-generation students (FGSs) are those whose parents did not pursue a university education (Kamanzi & al., 2010).

My studies were very interesting, it was motivating, and at the same time, it also met my goals: one day, I wanted to return in my community. I said to myself: "If I can find as much as possible, that is to say, to train myself and then give back to my community." - Marie[3] (free translation)

Table 1.
Characteristics of Study Projects that have Become Life Projects

Reasons		
Get training to work in an Indigenous environment	Learn more about one's own culture and Indigenous cultures in general	Explore or deepen one's Indigenous identity
Local roots			
Community of origin	Other communities	Urban environment	Not anchored in a territory *a priori*
Moment of emergence		
Before university studies	During university studies	

Source: Ratel, J.–L. (2019). *Du projet d'études au projet de vie : une analyse des parcours universitaires chez les étudiants des Premières Nations du Québec* [Doctoral dissertation, Université Laval]. Corpus.

---

3 To ensure confidentiality, first names are pseudonyms.

What Can we Learn from our Results?

A Call for More Flexibility from Universities to Enable Indigenous Students to Achieve Their Personal and Collective Goals

1 The pursuit of university studies among First Nations involves all stakeholders working with educational institutions, in collaboration with the representatives of Indigenous organizations.

Off-campus, training cohorts are offered for certain programs (e.g. teacher education and administration) as a means to better meet local needs and offer many students a first contact with training that would otherwise be geographically inaccessible to them.

On campus, developing and maintaining relationships with Indigenous communities and urban Indigenous organizations is also critical to supporting Indigenous students. Namely, such support makes it possible to promote the rolling-out of a culturally relevant service offering and to take into account the needs of family members who, in many cases, follow the student on their pathway.

2 The Indigenous community, in a broader sense, remains at the heart of Indigenous students' accomplishments and plans for the future.

Most Indigenous students are financially supported by their communities, which reap several benefits associated with the training of the next generation of students who promote their self-determination. For students who project themselves into other communities or urban environments, these spin-offs benefit more broadly Indigenous self-determination beyond the community of origin. These fallouts are a reminder that Indigenous identity unfolds on a territory that cannot be limited to the boundaries defined by colonial laws.

The members of my community paid for my studies, my allowances, all that, and yes, I wanted to give back to the community and that's why, among other things, I made this tool. I could have done it on many other subjects, but I did it on this one. And, among other things, because I said to myself: "Maybe I could put it into practice." I think I'm not the only one who shares that, that feeling, of wanting to give back to the community. – Jérôme (free translation)

3 Pursuing a university education does not follow a strictly linear model.

Québec's education system offers a certain degree of latitude for returning to school and reorienting oneself. In the context of Indigenous students, this relative flexibility is necessary for the achievement of their life projects, given their mostly atypical profile and their more often non–linear pathways. It is also by following a path of increased accessibility that takes into account the specific realities of atypical pathways that institutions will foster greater academic democratization, in the wake of the university model as a democratic public sphere (Giroux, 2002). This phenomenon is not unique to Indigenous students (CSE, 2013). It is in line with the massification of higher education and reminds us that institutions maintain themselves while metamorphosing in the light of the social changes that unfold over the generations (Fallis, 2007).

Courses of Action

✓ Increase the availability of a culturally relevant training and service offering for Indigenous students on campuses in order to promote their integration and improve retention throughout their educational pathways.

✓ Improve the university training offering in Indigenous communities as a means to promote geographic access to education and cultural security.

✓ Enhance the service offering to Indigenous students in cities, off university campuses, including housing and family support services.

✓ Include more Indigenous members in university governance.

Lines of Research

✓ Conduct longitudinal research with Indigenous learners starting in high school, in collaboration with Indigenous school organizations, to follow their educational and career pathways over a longer period of time.

✓ Conduct a survey to analyze the pathways of Indigenous university students quantitatively and longitudinally, in collaboration with Indigenous organizations and academic institutions.

For Further Reading

Ratel, J.-L. (2018). L'éducation autochtone au Québec sous l'angle de la sociologie. *Cahiers de recherche sociologique*, (64), 129-147.

Ratel, J.-L. & Pilote, A. (2021). Métamorphoses de l'université et parcours d'étudiants autochtones au Québec : enjeux d'accessibilité aux études et de persévérance scolaire dans une perspective de décolonisation de l'éducation. *Recherches en éducation*, (44), 100–113.

Ratel, J.-L. & Sioui, B. (2021). Portrait historique des Autochtones du Québec et de leurs parcours scolaires. In M. Potvin, M.-O. Magnan, J. Larochelle-Audet & J.-L. Ratel (ed.), *La diversité ethnoculturelle, religieuse et linguistique en éducation – Théorie et pratique* (2ⁿᵈ edition) (pp. 48–66). Fides.

References

Bertaux, D. (2010). *Le récit de vie : l'enquête et ses méthodes*. Armand Collin.

Blaser, M. (2004). Life Projects: Indigenous Peoples' Agency and Development. In M. Blaser, H. A. Feit & G. McRae (eds.), *In the Way of Development: Indigenous Peoples, Life Projects and Globalization* (pp. 26–44). Zed Books.

Conseil supérieur de l'éducation. (2013). *Parce que les façons de réaliser un projet d'études universitaires ont changé…* Conseil supérieur de l'éducation.

Dufour, E. (2015). *La sécurité culturelle en tant que moteur de réussite postsecondaire : enquête auprès d'étudiants autochtones de l'Institution Kiuna et des espaces adaptés au sein des établissements allochtones* [Master's thesis, Université de Montréal].

Fallis, G. (2007). *Multiversities, Ideas, and Democracy*. University of Toronto Press.

National Indian Brotherhood. (1972). *Indian Control of Indian Education*.

Giroux, H. A. (2002). Neoliberalism, Corporate Culture, and the Promise of Higher Education: The University as a Democratic Public Sphere. *Harvard Educational Review, 72*(4), 425–464.

Kamanzi, P. C., Bonin, S., Doray, P., Groleau, A., Murdoch, J., Mercier, P., Blanchard, C., Gallien, M. & Auclair, R. (2010). *Transitions : Note 9 : Les étudiants canadiens de première génération à l'université : la persévérance aux études*. Université du Québec à Montréal.

Miles, M. & Huberman, M. (2003). *Analyse des données qualitatives*. De Boeck.

Ratel, J.-L., Bacon, M. & Pilote, A. (2021). De la prise en charge à la décolonisation : un regard rétrospectif sur cinq décennies d'éducation postsecondaire autochtone au Québec. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education / Revue canadienne d'enseignement supérieur, 51*(3), 67–81.

To cite this article

Biographical Note

Jean-Luc Ratel is a research professional and lecturer in the Department of Foundations and Practices in Education at Université Laval and a lecturer in the Department of Special Education and Training at the Université du Québec à Montréal. He is interested in the sociology of education, Indigenous education and inclusive education. He is involved in several collaborative research projects with Indigenous organizations and communities in Québec and Nunavut. His work has included projects on educational success in Nunavut, post-secondary education among the Inuit People, history education and transition to post-secondary education among the Naskapi People, and language education among the Innu People. He has also published several articles and co-edited the second edition of the collective work entitled "La diversité ethnoculturelle, religieuse et linguistique en éducation" (Fides, 2021). He holds degrees in sociology (B.A., M.Sc.) and in educational administration and policy (Ph.D.).

Attribution:
Moriah Sallaffie

oresquebec.ca
info@oresquebec.ca