

Adult College Students

Understanding Them to Better Support Them

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For several years, we have seen a growing number of adult students enrolled in programs leading to a Diploma of College Studies (DCS or DEC). And rightly so, since Emploi-Québec data show that by 2022, 86% of jobs will require college training (Lassad, 2018), which represents approximately 85,000 new jobs (Fédération des cégeps, 2015). In October 2020, at the Forum sur la requalification de la main-d'œuvre et sur l'emploi, employer associations, central labour bodies, the education community, the community sector and the Legault government emphasized the need to requalify several thousand workers who lost their jobs (190,000 additional unemployed) due to the COVID-19 pandemic (The Canadian Press, 2020). In this context, it is expected that many adults will return to school to upgrade their skills, complete

training, or retrain in a new field to obtain a job or better working conditions. In addition, data from the Service régional d'admission du Montréal métropolitain (SRAM) indicate an increase of nearly 40% in adult student enrolment at the college level between 2007 and 2016 (Lapointe Therrien and Richard, 2018), but their graduation rate (about 40%) is significantly lower than that of younger students (about 63%).¹ However, little research has been done on the realities of adult students enrolled in college, and the studies that have been conducted date back several years (Deguire *et al.*, 1996; Bessette, 1999; Larue, Malenfant & Jetté, 2005; Doray, Mason & Bélanger, 2005). What do we really know about these students and their realities?

¹ The graduation rates presented here concern students in Population A [those with no previous college experience, Ed.], all colleges and programs combined, minimum duration + 2 years for the 2007 to 2012 cohorts (Lapointe Therrien & Richard, 2018, p. 20).

We felt it was essential to examine their realities and needs, which led us to conduct two exploratory studies: one with adult college students and the other with their teachers (Lapointe Therrien and Richard, 2018; Lapointe Therrien, 2019). In this article, we will discuss the realities perceived and experienced by the participants we interviewed (students and teachers). The comments of the adult students, in terms of the ease, difficulties and needs mentioned, will be amalgamated with those of the teachers who were questioned about their perceptions of the realities and needs of these students. The objective is to highlight the perceptions that match or diverge, complement each other, or shed light on little-known realities, in order to propose various avenues for improvement.

Although some of the realities also seem to apply to younger students, or even to all students, the objectives of the research were not to compare the realities of adult students with those of other students or to make value judgements about the needs that were raised. We were concerned with reflecting what was reported by adult students and teachers.

Defining adult students

At the outset, it appears necessary to characterize what an adult college student is. There are several criteria for distinguishing an adult student from a younger one. Although nothing is clearly specified by the Ministère de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur (MEES), references to age and several other characteristics are important markers. With respect to characteristics, Ross-Gordon (2011)

identifies two major trends: adult students have multiple roles in their lives in addition to responsibilities often marked by complex situations: delay in enrolling in postsecondary education, part-time school attendance, work, financial independence limiting eligibility for student financial assistance, parenthood, and dependents.

Regarding age, although there is no consensus among the authors consulted, many references allow us to identify a boundary at age 24 (Deguire *et al.*, 1996; Bessette, 1999; Markle, 2015).

Methodology and population studied

A qualitative approach combined with an inductive process were preferred because these approaches promote the understanding and deepening of participants' perceptions, opinions and behaviours in order to describe their reality. Since the data obtained from SRAM show that 78.6% of adult students are enrolled in technical programs, we focused on these students.² Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the winter and fall of 2018 with, on one hand, 21 students enrolled in nine programs at four French-language colleges in the Quebec City area and, on the other hand, 19 teachers active in 14 programs at six French-language colleges in the Quebec City area. The methodological approach adopted limits the generalizability of the results. However, although other realities may mark the college experience of adult students, the comments gathered in the interviews open up avenues for reflection to better understand the experience of a certain number of these students, who are increasingly numerous in college classes.

² It should be noted that 8.9% of adult students are enrolled in pre-university programs and 12.5% in Springboard programs (Lapointe Therrien and Richard, 2018).

Ease and difficulties of adult students

Teachers' perceptions of the realities faced by adult students are largely consistent with students' own affirmations that they have high levels of maturity and motivation to succeed, a focus on performance, many obligations, and good organizational skills. They also appear to be attentive and involved in class, have no time to waste, are determined, know what they want, are persistent, assertive, and very curious.

In addition to this rather positive portrait of adult students, there are several difficulties that adult students and teachers agree on: adapting to the pace of student life, lack of energy, the technological adaptation required to use the various educational platforms, and the adaptation to new software.

Other obstacles were reported by the students themselves, with financial difficulties topping the list. Nearly three quarters (71.4%) of the students interviewed said they were experiencing

financial difficulties. This reality means that many (66.7%) of them must receive financial assistance that is often insufficient to meet their needs during their studies. For the vast majority (76.2%) of participants, bank loan payments and parenting costs must be added to the total for those (52.4%) with dependent children. Unfortunately, these financial difficulties lead to greater debt, as well as restrictions and privations (going out, food).

In addition to financial problems, there are other concerns, including difficulties in absorbing the subject matter. It is difficult to say whether this is because these students have not been studying for some time. In fact, according to the experiences reported by the students, this limitation appears to be a consequence of the work-study-family balance, a context in which there are many concerns and in which the lack of time has repercussions, notably a reduced number of hours of sleep. It is reasonable to believe that this lack of sleep and the other concerns influence various behaviours, including the ability to concentrate.

When time is short, quality of life suffers!

In this regard, it should be pointed out that lack of time is one of the most important elements, along with financial difficulties, in the lives of students, yet was not developed by the teachers interviewed. Nevertheless, it has important consequences on the lives of adult students.

Lacking time to rest and to maintain a social life, including a relationship, is a notable hardship. In this regard, the students insist that lack of sleep can create problems of insomnia, concentration and retention of material as well as greater irritability. Sports activities are obviously restricted and healthy eating habits are also affected as there is no time to cook. In the family, the impact is felt in the time available to cook meals, take care of the children, participate in extracurricular activities, etc. Student parents mention that it is often difficult to manage some of their children's daily needs: help with homework, illness, waking up at night, etc. These situations can lead to feelings of guilt and uncertainty about their parenting skills among those who prioritize their studies to the detriment of time spent with their family.



Being in class with younger students

While the teachers perceive the interaction between younger and adult students in class as very positive, the same cannot be said of the adult students' feelings about this situation. For the teachers, the fact that the adult students are often a minority favours mixing them with the younger students. In small groups, relations gradually become more family-like, with students getting to know each other over the course of the sessions.

However, few of the adult students mentioned mutual aid as a positive aspect. In general, they need to be asked to think about the benefits of heterogeneous classes in order to name them. In reality, when looking more closely at the stories of adult students, it appears they often see only the negative side to working with younger students. The lack of attendance and maturity attributed to the younger students, as well as the difficulties associated with doing teamwork, are often mentioned. Thus, from the adult students' point of view, younger students generally end up in college as a logical consequence of their schooling, out of obligation or under the influence of parents and friends. They note that many young people do not express the same level of motivation with respect to studies, which they associate with their absence from classes, their lateness, their naps in class, their internet use, their lack of listening skills, etc. With regard to teamwork, conciliating schedules is also a difficulty encountered, for a variety of reasons (class schedules, job, family). Adult students observe that younger students often tend to hand in their work late or procrastinate, lack interest or motivation, aim for a

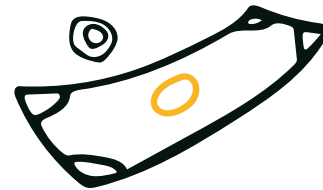
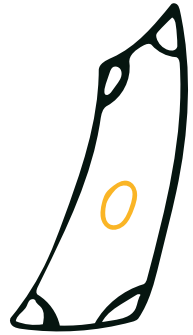
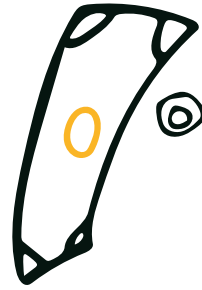
passing grade, plagiarize and/or are less diligent. They added that in a heterogeneous team (adults/young adults), the younger students often lack rigour in their tasks, which has an impact on their grade. The adult students therefore prefer to rework their parts of the assignment to avoid a poor grade.

In light of these diverging perceptions, the statement by some teachers that working together helps the younger students gain in maturity inspires reflection: is it the role of the adult students to contribute to the maturation of the younger ones? Do they wish to take on this role? Is it fair to rely on these students to lead the others in the right direction?

In addition to financial problems, there are other concerns, including difficulties in absorbing the subject matter.

A look at the needs of students

In both studies, several questions were asked to identify the needs of adult students and teachers. During the interviews, the adult students were asked to express themselves on what they felt needed to be improved to support them in their academic career, with regard to different themes: teachers, college education, pedagogy used in class, study programs, services offered, and measures put in place at their college. Teachers were also asked similar questions in order to obtain their perspectives, experiences and perceptions of their own needs and those of the students. As with the



description of adult students and their realities, the responses provided by the participants shed light on shared views or conversely, highlight little known realities. Nevertheless, many of their responses lead to proposals that could improve the transition of adult students to college education.

With respect to teachers and pedagogy

The vast majority of teachers emphasize the importance of offering a variety of availabilities to students. This responds perfectly to the needs expressed by the students interviewed. Maintaining the skills and knowledge of teachers regarding course content, especially in technical programs where knowledge evolves rapidly, is also an important factor mentioned by both groups. On the other hand, enforcement of rules (discipline, class rules, program rules, etc.) was not identified by the teachers as a need for adult students, whereas it was identified as a major irritant by the latter. Conversely, teachers perceive that adult students often need reassurance and assistance in adapting to college, while adult students feel that their need is to have access to an environment where their realities and obligations are taken into account.

For the majority of the teachers interviewed, it does not seem necessary to adapt their pedagogical approach to adult students. They feel that it works because their students are successful in their courses. Others direct their pedagogical concerns toward other student populations since there are fewer adult students. Some try to meet the needs of all, others lack

knowledge of learning differences concerning adult students, or do not want to be inequitable. Some teachers adapt their pedagogical approaches to accommodate adult students through peer support initiatives in which adult students help younger students with their experiences. Others provide mature students with materials to allow them to move ahead with their work at a faster pace than the rest of the class. Given that time constraints create one of the most important difficulties for adult students, peer support does not appear to be advantageous for them. Finally, several teachers expressed an interest in being better informed or trained on the needs of adult students.³

As for the students, although the majority of them appreciate the multiple pedagogical strategies used by teachers, they feel that modifications, or even adaptations, of certain strategies would be beneficial, particularly with regard to teamwork, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and practical work.⁴ With respect to equity, it seems difficult to apply one and the same rule to everyone, since it can unfortunately become unfair for some. This is precisely what adapted measures are trying to address.

With respect to the programs and services offered

Teachers and students emphasize the importance of having programs in which students can progress quickly and receive practical training. However, in other respects, comments were mixed.

Many teachers (44.4%) felt that the programs consider the realities of both adult and younger students. They explain:

- 1) that the programs train students for the labour market;
- 2) that they aim to teach competencies that apply in the same way to everyone;
- 3) that they require the young adults to adapt to college and the adults to adapt to going back to school;
- 4) that they can sometimes even give adults an advantage because of the level of difficulty.

³ In this regard, TÉLUQ University is currently offering a distance learning course entitled *Conciliation travail-études (famille): défis et solutions* [Work-study (family) balance: challenges and solutions, Ed.]. Training adapted to college realities could also be developed

⁴ The proposed suggestions will be presented later in the solutions section.

In contrast, more than half of teachers (55.6%) and a majority of students felt that programs do not always reflect the realities of adult students. Several reasons were given:

- 1) lack of flexibility in scheduling;
- 2) difficulties in reconciling schedules (e.g., daycare and internship schedules);
- 3) difficulty in completing a technical program in three years due to the overload of responsibilities adult students face (work, studies, family);
- 4) adaptation that is solely the responsibility of adult students;
- 5) demotivation due to learning difficulties and differences with younger students.

Lacking time to rest and to maintain a social life, including a relationship, is a notable hardship

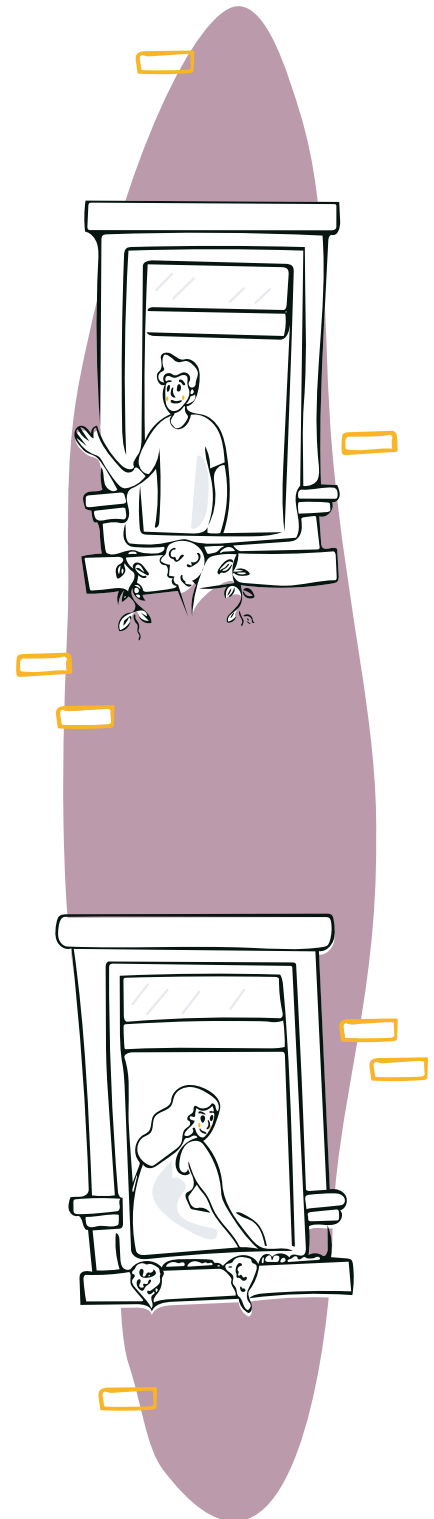
Despite these observations, it appears that adult students are not, strictly speaking, asking for different programs, but rather for conditions that promote their academic progress within an educational structure that does not seem to have been designed

or even adapted for them. For several years, colleges have been making efforts to facilitate the transition from high school to college by putting in place various measures, just as they do to help students with learning disabilities or to accommodate student athletes. There appears to be a delay, or an oversight, when it comes to adult students—perhaps because of their "unofficial" status.

With respect to the services offered by colleges, the teachers mention that their college processes applications for recognition of acquired competencies (RAC). However, adult students said that RAC focuses more on past academic achievement than on work experience. The students added that better planning of their schedules and the presence of a childcare centre (CPE) on site would also improve their conditions.

How to create favourable conditions for college studies?

The experiences gathered through this research study lead us to propose various avenues to explore in order to improve the learning conditions of adult students. Obviously, each of these proposals can be interpreted and shaped, and must be adapted according to the practices, requirements and pedagogical contexts in which teachers work. Some already exist but are not found in all colleges or are not equally available. Others would be beneficial to students of all ages. In all cases, the goal is to report on ideas that can help make college education more inclusive and friendly for all, especially for adult students who often seem to be overlooked.



Suggestions for teachers and pedagogy

Maintain options for availability and accessibility to be easily reached by students (access to their class schedule, meeting times, email address, etc.).

Be sensitive to how rules are applied (taking charge of classroom discipline, applying class rules, program, course plan, deadlines, class times, time off as indicated in the calendar, etc.).

For many adult students, organizing and planning their schedules can be a challenge. Changes to schedules can become a real headache because of family and work obligations.

Make course content, exercises, deadlines, etc. available in advance so that students can move forward at their own pace, get ahead and organize their time according to their family situation (sick child, help with children's homework, etc.) or their professional obligations.

Offer time in class to complete assignments in order to promote work-study-family balance, with the goal of reducing out-of-class study time.

Be attentive to the difficulties encountered during teamwork (levels of motivation, organizational issues, etc.). Here are some suggestions:

- 1) set aside time in class;
 - 2) offer rigorous follow-up with regard to task division and compliance with instructions;
 - 3) evaluate part of the assignment individually;
 - 4) when possible, also allow the work to be done individually.
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Create tutorials (building on skills learned during the pandemic) and make them available at all times on college platforms to facilitate the use of various technologies and software with which adult students are not familiar.

Focus on practical exercises to promote understanding and retention of the material as well as attention span in class.

Suggestions for departments and colleges

The out-of-classroom environment in which a student evolves can have an impact on pedagogy (Tremblay & Quirion, 2021). Departmental and institutional solutions can also be considered, the latter influencing pedagogical solutions and vice versa. For example, the presence of a day-care service in a college can reduce the organizational difficulties of student parents, help reduce their level of anxiety and indirectly have positive effects on learning.

Make programs as practice-oriented as possible (practical exercises, internships, simulations, etc.).

Evaluate the need for certain student expenses (electronic equipment and devices, uniforms, etc.), the accessibility of internship sites, as well as the possibility of having access to paid internships or to a reduction of associated costs, particularly for transportation.

Develop more programs that allow students to take classes at a distance or in a dual-mode format, in the evenings and on weekends, or during summer sessions.

Offer more accelerated programs.

Divide certain DCS programs into three ACS programs to allow for progressive and qualifying training.

Offer information sessions for adult students and their spouses to inform them and make them aware of the realities they will encounter.

Support students and teachers in the use of ICT (software, platforms, availability of technicians in class, etc.).

Make computer and technology support readily available and fast.

Support teachers in keeping their competencies up to date.

Make schedules readily available to allow students to plan their time (work-study-family organization, etc.).

Try to create balanced class schedules (avoid travel, concentrate classes in fewer days, plan schedules according to parental realities).

Improve recognition of acquired competencies (RAC), to include academic and professional experience.

Improve access to a CPE (in or near the college).

Limitations of the research

Although they shed light on rarely discussed topics, the results presented in this article have some limitations. Two of the main limitations are the size of the sample and the fact that the survey was conducted only in the Capitale-Nationale region. It would be interesting to document the realities of adult students who interrupt their studies in order to better understand what contributes to their perseverance and what causes them to drop out. PAREA research on this topic is underway. Also, in order to better understand the diversity of adult students' experiences, it would be appropriate to survey adult students from recent immigrant backgrounds, who, based on our personal observations, are enrolling in colleges in large numbers. A comparative study of the realities and needs of all students would also be beneficial since

many of the realities mentioned by adult students and teachers also affect other types of students.

Conclusion

This article highlights some of the knowledge and misunderstandings of what adult college students experience. At times, it highlights a lack of balance in the measures put in place (or the absence of measures) to meet their needs. In our opinion, various actions on the part of the diverse college stakeholders would be beneficial to adult students, if not everyone. Many of the measures put in place in colleges, supported by teachers, consider the multiple student populations such as student athletes, immigrant students, those requiring adapted services and many others. It appears that measures could also be put into place to make teachers more attentive to the realities of adult students. The proposed solutions are approaches with which most teachers are familiar. To achieve this objective, the colleges must also support teachers in their needs related to training, technical and pedagogical support, etc. As for the solutions proposed to departments and institutions, these need to be considered in terms of their implementation.

Québec's needs in terms of qualified labour are significant, and concrete actions to contribute to requalification and the upgrading of skills are necessary to allow young and not-so-young people to obtain diplomas that correspond to the requirements of the job market. In a post-pandemic context, it is likely that a large number of adult students will find themselves back in school. It seems reasonable to question the capacity of the college system to

accommodate them while also meeting their needs. As for all students, it is the responsibility of all the college network stakeholders to provide them with a learning environment that is adapted to their realities and to which they feel they belong, and to put in place favourable conditions that will enable them to achieve their ambitions and reach their dreams. ■

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