Recognition of Acquired Competencies at the College Level

An avenue to be optimized and promoted

Katie Bérubé and Sophie Gosselin

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The labour shortage in certain key sectors of the economy is of concern to political authorities. As evidence of this, in 2021 the Minister of Higher Education mandated the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (hereinafter Council) to examine the potential of the recognition of acquired competencies (RAC) to contribute to the qualification and requalification of individuals, resulting in the brief _Recognition of Acquired Competencies at the College Level: An Avenue to Be Optimized and Promoted._

In carrying out this work, the Council broadened its reflection to include the status of RAC at the college level. It proposes avenues of development that will allow the RAC process to continue to grow and to optimize its deployment in the years to come. The Council believes that RAC should be viewed from an emancipatory perspective that fosters personal development, in order to keep individuals engaged in the workforce and provide them with opportunities for professional development.

After briefly setting the context for RAC at the college level, this article presents a synthesis of the issues brought to light by the Council's work as well as its recommendations to the actors concerned.

About the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation

The Conseil supérieur de l'éducation is a government body that informs the Ministers of Education and Higher Education about the state and needs of education and advises them on all matters relating to education. It is composed of 22 people representing all levels and sectors of education and is supported by several committees and commissions, including the Commission de l'enseignement et de la recherche au collégial [Commission on College Teaching and Research, Ed.] (CERC), which has about 15 members, the majority of whom work in colleges. In 2022, the work of the CERC led the Council to publish two briefs for colleges: _College Education: Educational Experience and New Realities_[1] and _Recognition of Acquired Competencies at the College Level: An Avenue to be Optimized and Promoted_. This article is a summary of the latter brief.[2]

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[1] Editor's note: The article "College Education: Educational Experience and New Realities," published in the Winter 2023 issue of _Pédagogie collégiale_, presents a summary of this brief.

[2] Interested readers can view the full brief in French as well as an English summary [cse.gouv.qc.ca/publications/reconnais-sance-acquis-collegial-50-0555].

RAC at college

In Quebec, RAC underwent a phase of development in the 2000s, notably following the Council's pivotal brief on the issue for all levels and sectors of education (CSE, 2000), which led to the adoption of the Government Policy on Adult Education and Continuing Education and Training (Québec, 2002).

The principles and corollaries formulated by the Council in its brief published in 2000 have essentially been taken up in the ministerial frameworks mapping out RAC. They postulate that knowledge and competencies acquired in and outside of school deserve to be recognized insofar as individuals can provide evidence that they possess them and that consequently, RAC activities must take into account the experiential nature of this learning by proposing a methodology and a regulatory framework. The Council emphasizes that recognition of informal and experiential learning is not about recognizing individuals' experience per se, but rather about recognizing the competencies that came from that experience.

RAC at college is defined as "an approach suitable for adults who have accumulated a significant body of work or life experience" (MES, 2021). It takes the form of an individualized approach, structured in different stages, with obtaining a diploma as its ultimate goal.

RAC is not limited to the college level: other levels of education and social actors offer other forms of recognition. For example, the fact that RAC at the college level is limited to a Diploma of College Studies (DCS) or an Attestation of College Studies (ACS) is a position taken by the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur (MES) to clearly situate the sphere of intervention of education within the available RAC offer. The government's desire to position the process as a recognized qualification pathway has contributed to its growth over the past 20 years.

The Council notes that RAC at the college level is timidly addressed in the *General and Vocational Colleges Act* and the *College Education Regulations*, and is primarily associated with the exemption, equivalency and substitution sections of the latter. These two documents do not explicitly refer to the RAC process and do not require colleges to organize a RAC service to implement it. The lack of guidelines creates confusion as to the very nature of the RAC process at the college level, which is often reduced, in people's minds, to a process of recognition of academic achievements.

The RAC process

The RAC process at the college level consists of five main steps:

1. The candidate obtains information on the process from their college;

2. They submit their application and self-assess their competencies;

3. The application is validated by the college;

4. A specialist evaluates the competencies acquired by the candidate through work and life experiences;

5. A certification of studies is issued at the end of the process.

The Council believes that RAC is too often placed in opposition to training rather than being seen as contributing to it. Although the RAC paradigm calls for the mobilization of competencies rather than their development, the RAC approach also contributes to training, whether through self-directed preparatory activities, further study or, more broadly, the performance of work in order to demonstrate skills.

The current situation: a few statistics

The Council has observed that, with respect to RAC, college program offerings have grown and diversified over the past decade. RAC is now offered in all 48 CEGEPs in Quebec. Two Centres of Expertise for the Recognition of Acquired Competencies (CERAC), located at the Cégep de Sainte-Foy and at Cégep Marie-Victorin, are mandated to support this service offering. In principle, according to these frameworks, the RAC process is offered to both adults and young people and in both regular and continuing education. However, it is offered to varying degrees in different establishments. Mostly used in continuing education, it remains marginal in regular education. Based on a census of program codes, the Council notes that RAC is present in 184 programs across 13 training sectors.[3]

The number of candidates at the validation step of their application has been on the rise for the past ten years and was nearly 4000 in 2018-2019.[4] There has been an increase in the number of candidates in programs leading to a DCS, even though the majority of applications are still concentrated in programs leading to an ACS. The vast majority of candidates in the process are Canadian citizens, although representation of people with permanent resident status is higher than it was ten years ago. There are still few applications from Indigenous individuals, as well as from people with recognized refugee or temporary resident status. Finally, the majority of candidates at this step are women and are generally 25 years old or older.

RAC issues and recommendations for colleges

In its brief, the Council presents issues to be considered on a priority basis and makes recommendations to the various actors concerned. To do so, it relies on its review of the current RAC framework at the college level, the use of structuring literature on the recognition of experiential learning, the analysis of available statistical data and, in particular, the consultation of specialists as well as organizations and groups of people involved in implementing RAC at the college level.[5] These issues are grouped into four broad categories : issues of perception, issues in higher education, issues at the institutional level, and issues at the individual level.

Issues of perception

Confusion, misunderstanding, resistance, prejudice

A consensus is emerging on the existence of a perception problem surrounding RAC, not only in the discourse of the college education community, but also within partner organizations, other ministries and the labour market. It is an overarching issue, because of its crucial importance and its repercussions on all the others.
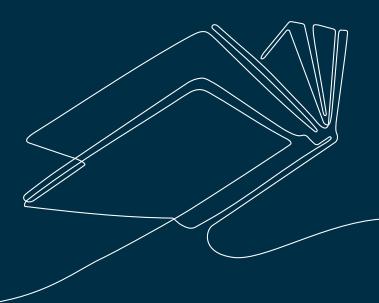
A number of misconceptions surrounding RAC still exist: that it's an easy or quick way to obtain a degree, that it's displacing the student population and jeopardizing teaching jobs, that it's a cumbersome process, etc. Such misconceptions of RAC may be based on a lack of knowledge, apprehensions, resistance or prejudice. Some people believe these misconceptions are marginal and do not impede the development of RAC or activities held in schools, while others consider they carry enough weight to hinder RAC growth.

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[3] Detailed tables on program offerings can be found in section 3.1 of the brief.

[4] Tables presenting these data according to RAC candidates' paths and their sociodemographic characteristics are available in sections 3.2 and 3.3 of the brief.

[5] The list of people and organizations consulted is available in the appendix to the brief.

One of the central ideas related to this issue is the perceived value of the RAC process and, ultimately, of the diploma that results from it. In educational institutions, the academic council is identified as one of the preferred venues to promote the RAC process and provide the information needed to understand it. This recognition is more difficult in environments where RAC is not well developed. This can lead to a vicious circle: few requests and few offers for the process, difficulty in developing expertise. Finally, the primary responsibility of the MES to promote RAC as a legitimate and promising qualification pathway was reaffirmed during the Council's consultations. It seems important to bolster the value of RAC by considering it not only as an option, but also as an individual right that is affirmed in the related frameworks. For example, the Council notes that the absence of any mention of the term in the CEGEP Act and its regulations fosters confusion as to the very nature and scope of RAC at the college level.

Much work remains to be done with respect to information, to ensure that RAC at the college level is accurately understood, both within educational institutions and externally, and by the individuals concerned. It is important to preserve and strengthen the structuring role of the MES in providing information about and promoting RAC.

Issues in higher education

Access to administrative data and research on RAC

Moreover, research on RAC remains a relatively young field of study that would benefit from targeted grants. A mature RAC system would have the data to evaluate its services and collaborate with the research community to learn more about, among other things, the experiences of people who have gone through the process, both during and after it (Bélisle and Fernandez, 2018). Furthermore, while the process is competency-based, the Council notes that colleges' reports are still associated with courses. This complicates the process and demonstrates an unfinished integration of the competency-based approach, which has been in place since 1993.

Government leadership and partnerships among main actors

There is no doubt as to the importance of the MES's involvement in the RAC dossier at the college level and its responsibility to set the broad orientations and the legal and regulatory bases of the system. Its commitment is essential for the continuation of the work and the full development of the service offer. Therefore, the

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Council believes that the MES must maintain leadership. The college network and the MES are at a pivotal point in solidifying the foundations of their respective contributions and cannot afford to avoid a reflection on the sharing of roles and responsibilities, with a view to complementing each other's mandates.

Synergy with the workplace

RAC is not a panacea for addressing critical labour needs. However, it can be leveraged to address them by first targeting areas most affected by the labor shortage. The challenge is to clearly define the cases in which RAC can truly support the path to employment. The project currently underway in the field of childhood education[6] appears to be a model that could be strengthened, adapted and expanded to other fields in response to labour shortage issues in certain sectors. The implementation of college certifications offered by the business services of the public college network could also foster the use of learning acquired in non-formal and informal settings.

Issues at the institutional level

Positioning RAC within educational institutions

Often, RAC struggles to take its place among institutional priorities, with continuing education and regular education frequently evolving in parallel, each giving priority to its own specific issues. Institutional choices have an impact on the development of RAC, and sometimes contribute to the perception of a marginal service within the establishment itself.

To encourage its development, it would be desirable for all college staff to familiarize themselves with this complex and specialized system, with the aim of sharing a concerted vision of it. The place occupied by RAC within a college's organizational structure can help to enhance its contribution to personal qualification and graduation.

Human resources

The development and deployment of the RAC service offering is dependent on the human resources invested in the process. Those consulted identified a challenge in recruiting staff for RAC, which requires a specific expertise profile. Indeed, full deployment of RAC requires expertise that is easier to develop when teams can devote themselves entirely to it. Some progress has been made in recent years with respect to the provision of training and support. For example, CERACs receive a grant to provide RAC consulting services to public and private colleges that receive funding.

Developing the service offer

All CEGEPs now offer the RAC process, to varying degrees. The majority of applications are in colleges located in urban centres. However,

the size of the college and number of applications do not automatically correspond. The Council also notes a clear concentration of applications in a few programs.[7] Although the number of applications at the validation stage more than doubled from 2010 to 2019, the trend appears to have stabilized since 2014.

Quality assurance systems and harmonization of practices

Concerns were raised during the consultations about the mechanisms in place to ensure the quality and rigour of the RAC process in each institution and throughout the college network. Quality assurance mechanisms can be set out in the *Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement* (IPESA) or in a *Politique institutionnelle de la reconnaissance des acquis et des compétences* [Institutional Policy on the Recognition of Acquired Competencies, Ed.] (PIRAC). According to those consulted, the PIRAC can also support institutional buy-in and mobilization around the RAC process.

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6 This project is described in section 2.5 of the brief.

7 According to March 2022 data, 52.2% of programs offered in RAC come from the administration, commerce and information technology sector, for example, Office Systems Technology, Accounting and Management Technology, Information Technology or Human Resources Management programs. A further 13.6% come from the social, educational and legal services sector, which includes programs such as Early Childhood Education, Special Care Counselling and Social Service.

Issues at the individual level

RAC accessibility

Accessibility to RAC can be compromised by three factors upstream of the process:

1. Individuals must be aware of RAC;[8]

2. They must be referred to the path best suited to their educational and professional development;

3. They must master non-program-specific but required competencies to ensure success of the RAC process, such as a sufficient level of literacy.

RAC applicants are not considered students. They cannot receive loans and bursaries or obtain a work or study permit. Thus, the RAC process is not available to international students, temporary workers or refugees, with certain exceptions. The Council recommends that financial accessibility to RAC be promoted for the most vulnerable.

Another difficulty is linked to combined paths[9] and missing components of education or training. Course offerings to cohorts do not follow the same parameters as RAC's individualized pathways, and combining the two raises organizational issues. Distance learning is one possible solution to this problem.

Support and guidance during the process

The Council stresses the importance of access, for people completing RAC, to support and guidance at all stages of the process, particularly for immigrants (CSE, 2021; Dagenais and Langevin, 2016). RAC candidates may also have special needs such as learning disabilities or relating to stress management. Even if they are not considered students, people in the RAC process must have access to college support services likely to support them.

Conclusion

This brief, issued in response to the concerns of the Minister of Higher Education about the current labour shortage, leads to 21 recommendations for continuing the development of RAC at the college level and optimizing its deployment in the years to come. Among other things, the Council invites the Minister to encourage the promotion of RAC, to focus on the development of projects specific to certain fields that are more in demand on the job market, and to offer facilitating conditions for both candidates and employers. It also emphasizes that RAC may have the potential to meet certain labour needs, without being a panacea. In the Council's view, the use of RAC goes beyond economic ends and job market needs. It refers to an emancipatory principle that fosters the development of individuals and their participation in society. ▬

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[8] Employment assistance resources are key partners in raising awareness of RAC at the college level. In its brief *The Inclusion of Immigrant Families: For A Greater Synergy in Adult Education* (2021), the Council also identified Accompagnement Québec as a resource to be encouraged in order to better reach this population.

[9] Paths that combine RAC for certain competencies of a program of study and courses for other competencies.

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Katie Berube has been the coordinator of the Commission de l'enseignement et de la recherche au collégial (CERC) of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation since 2017. She has been involved in the field of education for nearly 25 years, and particularly in college education for the past 17 years. Among other things, she coordinated the work leading to the Conseil's briefs on the 50th anniversary of colleges, on the educational experience and new realities, and on the recognition of acquired competencies.

conseil@cse.gouv.qc.ca

Sophie Gosselin is a research and transfer officer at the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation, where her role is to contribute to the work of the Conseil and to disseminate it in the higher education networks. Passionate about colleges, she has been a History and Social Science teacher at the CEGEP level and a college education advisor at the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur.

conseil@cse.gouv.qc.ca