

BRIEF TO THE MINISTER OF
EDUCATION, HIGHER EDUCATION
AND RESEARCH

Distance Education in Québec Universities : Maximizing the Potential

SUMMARY

JUNE 2015

Conseil supérieur
de l'éducation



Distance education has a long history in Québec universities. Thanks to a boom in evolving technologies, it is currently at the heart of a rapid expansion in new modes of education, characterized primarily by:

- a growing trend in the use of distance learning activities by both universities and students;
- increasing interest even among universities, teaching units and faculties who have little or no experience in this field;
- diversification of teaching and learning activities;
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) (*see box opposite*), a highly marketed phenomenon.

<i>Massive</i>	Reaches a large number of people;
<i>Open</i>	No admission requirements, free and open access;
<i>Online</i>	Via the web;
<i>Course</i>	Structured content including videos, textbooks, quizzes, etc.

Concerned with this expansion, the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation explored the issues at stake for the Québec university system. Based on the outcomes of extensive research and consultation, the current brief presents an up-to-date overview of distance education and recommendations for the development of the university system over the medium and long term.

1. An Updated Vision of Distance Education

Distance education is inextricably tied to a reality that is multi-faceted, as it is confined to neither a single, specific pedagogical approach or instruction method. For example, evolving technologies have made it possible to integrate synchronous learning activities that connect in real time students who otherwise might have been isolated or grouped in different locations. More importantly, the use of new technologies in universities as a whole is such that it can sometimes challenge the use of time spent in the classroom, opening the door to courses that can offer both face-to-face and web-based learning, synchronous and/or asynchronous, in varying combinations. Consequently, distance education must now be defined as any activity that more or less involves disassociating teaching and learning from space and time.

Moreover, distance education can include not only activities offered across national boundaries, but also those extending beyond standard degree programs, such as MOOCs. This phenomenon is both recent — the first MOOC was baptised only in 2008 — and varied, as it includes courses that can:

- Be based on pedagogical approaches drawing on a connectivist model (knowledge generated through interaction) or one centred on the transmission of knowledge;
- Be comprised of some content that cannot be used, altered or disseminated without prior consent;
- Be tied to (or that some wish to see tied to) paid services — tutoring, examinations, certification — and even university credits.

The Conseil's review of the most recent literature on the subject — studies primarily conducted on the asynchronous delivery of distance education — revealed that:

- Distance education contributes to more than just geographical or physical accessibility to higher education: As it introduces greater flexibility in organizing studies, it can accommodate new student realities such as the study/work balance, study/family balance and returning to studies. Indeed, many students who register in distance courses do not live far from university campuses;
- Distance education benefits students of all ages, whether in initial training or seeking further qualifications. Although recent Québec and Canadian studies conducted among university students challenge the assumption of a widespread infatuation with distance education, they also confirm its appeal for a significant number of students;

- Content and objectives determine whether or not a course is a suitable match for distance education activities, rather than field of study or discipline;
- Under some conditions, distance education can lead to economies of scale, yet to be of any quality would undoubtedly demand substantial investment;
- Quality distance education courses require the use of the right pedagogical methods, adapted course material and proper student support. Particularly in asynchronous learning, they involve transforming the task of teaching and the need — in some cases — for specialized resources (educational technologists, for example);
- The mode of delivery alone is not a guarantee of quality. Moreover — and contrary to some beliefs — distance education does include interactive components, thanks to real-time or deferred communication. Indeed, university students overall appear satisfied with their full or partial distance courses. With regard to MOOCs, they are generally not recognized in standard university curricula, regardless of their scope and requirements;
- The success of a distance course, irrespective of the mode of delivery used, depends on many factors. For the MOOCs, only a small percentage of participants complete them, as their objective is rarely a diploma.

2. Distance Education in Québec Universities

Aggregated data point to an increase of distance education activities in universities across Québec. This growth is accompanied by a diversification of the disciplines and student populations involved. Unfortunately, given the panoply of definitions, methodologies and indicators used, it is impossible to draw an accurate picture of the situation.

Not all Québec universities use distance education with the same intensity or at the same pace. Since its creation in 1972, Télé-université (TELUQ) offers all its distance courses in a number of delivery modalities. Based on the classroom model, other universities have also established the offer of distance education to varying degrees. This is the case for Université Laval and Concordia University, in addition to other institutions in remote regions serving a scattered population, as well as some teaching units specifically serving a more mature student population. However, there is still a smattering of universities that do not offer many distance education activities. Regardless of the current extent of their commitment to distance education, an increasing number of Québec universities are beginning to include it in their development plans. In this context, TELUQ is trying to reposition itself, notably by pursuing partnerships with other Québec universities to further develop the offer of distance education. Examples of collaborations between universities can be found, but in scant numbers. Those that some universities have established with institutions from other levels of instruction within their territories appear especially helpful.

Cross-border distance education activities may also require to be multiplied as the offer expands. For example, some of the university representatives consulted by the Conseil saw distance education as an opportunity to prepare foreign students prior to their arrival on Québec campuses.

Moreover, nearly half of Québec universities have recently created MOOCs or are in the process of doing so. In general, these are repurposed versions of existing courses offered on the university's (or a U.S.) platform. These MOOCs can also be found on the OCEAN portal (*see* box opposite). They are available at no charge with no admission requirements to a large number of learners. These are also non-credit courses that typically reach individuals outside the traditional university student population. For communities unfamiliar with distance education, MOOCs can be an opportunity to discover its potential, acquire expertise in the field, and transfer knowledge into regular courses. For others, these are primarily a means of making their skills more visible.

OCEAN is a portal for MOOCs offered in French, launched in November 2013 by five French, Swiss and Belgian institutions, in collaboration with Université de Montréal and its two affiliated schools. Unlike a hosting platform, OCEAN is structured more like a scientific journal, with an editorial board selecting the MOOCs. An individual interested in a MOOC posted on OCEAN is redirected to the platform that offers it.

Many university actors, speaking for themselves or on behalf of groups they represent, have recently expressed their views on the issue of distance education in trade magazines, in surveys, during the 2013 Québec summit on higher education (*Sommet sur l'enseignement supérieur*) or in the post-summit follow-ups. These views, together with those expressed by university representatives, helped the Conseil identify several areas of consensus and concern, which varied according to the group of stakeholders involved:

- Distance education is unanimously recognized as a means of promoting accessibility to university studies;
- For many, distance education is here to stay, and as such should be maximized, even though it is not a cure-all (namely because it is not a perfect match for all courses nor all students);
- Some faculty members and students are questioning the reasons underlying the use of distance education in Québec universities, decrying the placement of financial interests front and center or decisions based on flawed thinking;
- All agree that distance education creates pedagogical challenges that could be overcome, notably through faculty and student support. While some expressed concern over the quality of distance education, those faculty members and students who have had some experience with it generally had positive things to say;
- Some university administrators point out the importance of costs involved in creating, offering and updating courses that include distance learning activities, and call on the Government to consider the distinctive nature of this mode of education in its funding rules;
- With the changes distance education has brought to the task of teaching, many complain that some categories of actors are being unduly recognized for their contribution, namely instructors, educational technologists and those who ensure student support. Others note the grey area of intellectual property;
- The adoption of institutional guidelines is often invoked in updating the rules governing recognition and intellectual property, as well as in steering the rollout of distance education in each institution. Some believe this would be best done through clear guidelines on a Québec-wide scale. There are also calls for greater consistency in the offer of distance education throughout the Québec university system;
- There is a paucity of opinions on the MOOCs themselves, likely due to their recent arrival and rather limited presence in Québec universities. While some were guarded toward this type of courses, those who had direct experience with them generally recognize their potential for experimenting with online learning, making their skills visible (including on the world stage) and enriching regular courses.

3. A Glance at Distance Education Beyond Québec

Distance education is significantly and rapidly evolving in some parts of the world, due to some common underlying trends:

- Increased demand for education;
- Diversification in learner profiles and paths;
- Financial pressures exerted on universities and students;
- Technological advances;
- Growing popularity of Open Educational Resources (OERs), that is, free and openly-licensed courses, modules, videos, manuals and other useful educational resources made available online.

At the same time, the expansion of new modes of education is expressed in different ways and degrees depending on the location, as noted in some regions of the world with which the Québec university system shares cultural, geographical, linguistic or policy affinities:

- The **United Kingdom** is a hub of solid expertise in the field of distance education thanks to its Open University (OU, *see* box opposite), which benefitted from strong government support at the time of its creation in 1969. Since then the OU has been providing leadership in the area of distance learning and OERs. It is also at the centre of many initiatives, including FutureLearn, a platform created in the fall of 2013 which offers over 100 MOOCs in partnership with 27 British universities and 10 universities from other countries.

The term “Open University” refers to a university which: 1) has no specific student admission requirements; 2) has lower tuition fees than those in effect at the national level; and 3) uses distance education exclusively to allow a very large number of students to register.

- Despite some initiatives, the use of distance education in **France** remains relatively modest to date. The French Government is now seeking to boost the use of digital education at every level of instruction. In higher education, this is embodied by the development of a Digital Agenda for 2013–2018, with the goal of France catching up to the United States in online learning and reaching students beyond its geographical boundaries, notably in French-speaking African countries. This work should be complete by 2017 with a target of 20% of French university courses being offered online. The most highly-marketed component of the Digital Agenda is a national MOOC platform called *France Université Numérique* (FUN), in which the French government is investing heavily and encouraging institutions to forge partnerships with the private sector. These French MOOCs may not appear to share many features; in some cases they are identified as “tutored” MOOCs, small private online courses (SPOCs), or MOOCs that lead to university credits, thus making them more like regular online courses.
- The higher education system in the **United States** has been facing serious problems with education funding and student debt for some years now. It is in this precarious context (if not a borderline crisis), that online learning has begun to emerge as a worthwhile path for many institutions to pursue. Although varying greatly from one setting to the next, its use is widespread: 25% of undergraduate students now take at least one distance course. Even though the very first organizations dedicated to MOOCs (Coursera, edX and Udacity) were created in the U.S., only a handful of American higher learning institutions are currently offering or are planning to offer MOOCs. The question of MOOCs’ value is far from settled, as indicated for example by the change in the mission of Udacity (a major MOOC provider that decided one year after its creation to switch to mainly workplace training), and the strong

opposition in California and Florida to state policy to integrate MOOCs in university programs.

- In **British Columbia**, the Ministry of Advanced Education created BCcampus in 2002, a support organization for both institutions and students with the aim of promoting online learning and the use of technologies in education. Government funding of this body is contingent on the latter's promotion of collaboration and shareable resources to reduce duplication of courses offered throughout the higher education system and ultimately creating economies of scale. Through BCcampus, the Government supports the production of online courses and course components accessible to all faculty across B.C. as well as the use of open textbooks for students in the various institutions;
- Several initiatives in **Ontario** have supported distance learning in post-secondary education for about 30 years now, with a good number of them launched by the Government of Ontario. Based on existing infrastructures and expertise, the latter is seeking to stimulate the development of e-learning through the creation of Ontario Online, a centre with the mission, as of Fall 2015, of grouping an offer of online courses in post-secondary education and strengthening expertise in e-learning. The Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities effectively translated this will into guidelines for institutions. The use of technologies is thus viewed as a means to promote access to studies and improve teaching and learning at an affordable cost, thanks to some shareable courses and services. Concretely, the number of registered students in online courses has now become one of the criteria in evaluating post-secondary institutions.

From this short summary of distance education around the world, some striking aspects from Québec's own situation emerge:

- There is very little participation by the private sector in the Québec higher education system—unlike what was noted in the U.S. and what the French Government is seeking to do—including in the creation and offer of online courses;
- There is a cautious move toward MOOCs and a shortage of ideas on whether they can be laddered into university credits, as in France and some American states;
- There is a lukewarm reception to the idea floated in the U.S., British Columbia and Ontario that distance education could play a role in meeting the challenges of university funding. Québec university representatives have pointedly noted that distance education is costly—if not more expensive—than classroom education, and have urged the Government to consider the distinctive nature of new modes of education in its funding rules;
- Except for the creation and support of TELUQ, the Québec government has not expressed a strong will to stimulate the rollout of distance education in university studies, unlike what was noted in the other regions examined;
- There is timid insistence on the notion that inter-university collaborations could maximize initiatives in the area of distance education, as seen in B.C., Ontario and the U.K.

4. The Conseil's Recommendations

The Conseil welcomes the idea of distance education being used in Québec universities, in other words, integrating distance learning activities in courses and/or programs of study. For the Conseil, these activities can be an equally valid means of supporting the education mission of universities as they can complement the classroom model. This is not a blank endorsement, however, and hinges on being able to balance accessibility, quality and viability (*see* box opposite). As the Conseil is not only in favour of accessibility to university studies, but also to a quality student experience, it thus cautions university communities not to embrace distance education as a mere means to cut costs, which could be detrimental to quality education. With this central idea in mind, the Conseil has formulated 13 recommendations to:

- Ensure clarity of information on new modes of education;
- Consider the distinctive nature of distance education;
- Support decisions and actions on a university-wide scale.

Accessibility: Distance education is not an end in itself but rather a means of making university studies more accessible to the Québec population, in terms of both time and location, and potentially reaching other users around the world.

Quality: The creation and offer of any distance courses must primarily include teaching standards and student support.

Viability: Distance education can contribute to the viability of the Québec university system, namely by leveraging collaboration and pooling resources.

Ensuring clarity of information on new modes of education

1. The Conseil encourages Québec universities, if they have not already done so, to clearly differentiate the specificity of courses they label MOOCs compared to their regular online courses, to avoid any confusion and misunderstanding, particularly among users and employers.
2. The Conseil recommends to Québec universities to make available to students clear information on the modes of delivery for each course (for example, what portion of online activities is synchronous or asynchronous) and the technological equipment required.

Considering the distinctive nature of distance education

3. The Conseil encourages Québec universities to ensure rules governing work agreements for different groups of employees are brought up to date to reflect the distinctive nature of the different modes of education.
4. The Conseil recommends to Québec universities to leverage professional development events as well as forums for information and knowledge sharing available to faculty and other concerned university staff to discuss the distinctive nature of distance education.
5. The Conseil recommends to Québec universities to jointly study issues related to distance education such as copyright and intellectual property to guide their practice in this regard.
6. The Conseil reiterates its 2012 recommendation that teaching units include the distinctive nature of new modes of education as part of ongoing course and program evaluations, and recommends to Québec universities to ensure the development and sharing of expertise in the evaluation of courses and programs offered based on the different modes of education.
7. The Conseil recommends to Québec university administrators to ensure students in distance education can easily access the necessary technological support in following distance education activities, receive adapted pedagogical support, and are informed of the different distance services available to them (psychological support, for example).

Supporting decisions and actions on a university-wide scale

8. The Conseil:
 - recommends to the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research to fund research projects that study the impact of distance education on accessibility to education, quality of the student experience and the viability of the Québec university system;
 - encourages Québec universities to conduct their own institutional research on their offer of distance education and disseminate the outcomes for the benefit of the entire university community.
9. The Conseil encourages Québec university administrators, if they have not already done so, to work together with their communities in establishing guiding principles for decisions and actions related to distance education, in a policy framework on distance education, for example.
10. The Conseil recommends to the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research to fully recognize in an updated policy on universities the contribution of distance education activities in fulfilling Québec's education objectives.
11. The Conseil:
 - recommends to directors of Québec university infrastructures to engage in dialogue, for example at the Bureau de coopération interuniversitaire (BCI), to create the right conditions for sharing services, expertise and infrastructures;
 - encourages Québec universities to develop inter-university agreements between themselves as well as with other organizations (for example, other educational institutions) for the purpose of sharing services, expertise and infrastructures and pooling their expertise in distance education by participating in forums that bring together many institutions, such as the Centre de liaison interordres en formation à distance (CLIFAD);
 - recommends to the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research to fully take into account technological needs in subsidies disbursed to universities.
12. The Conseil recommends:
 - to the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research to action the recommendation formulated by Tremblay and Roy (2014) on the funding of projects that promote inter-faculty and/or inter-university collaboration in the offer of courses and programs;
 - to bci to compile, update and publicize a catalogue of distance courses and programs offered throughout Québec universities.
13. The Conseil recommends to the Minister of Education, Higher Education and Research and to Québec universities to engage in a discussion on jointly maximizing the potential of distance education in the internationalization of Québec universities, notably to review admission and funding rules for students outside Québec pursuing distance education in the Québec education system.

This document provides a summary of the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation's brief *La formation à distance dans les universités québécoises : un potentiel à optimiser*, which is available on the Conseil's website at www.cse.gouv.qc.ca.