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HOW CAN QUEBEC BECOME A LEADER IN DISTANCE LEARNING?

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Distance learning is not a recent innovation in education. Correspondence courses in which students mail in their exam responses have existed for over 100 years.¹ But the pandemic certainly accelerated the implementation of remote learning in higher education. When university professors and students were forced to leave school benches in March 2020, the existing video-conferencing and telecommunication tools were put to the test in an effort to ensure continuity in the school year. And while the virtual learning experience may have presented its challenges in those first months, the long-overdue disruption of traditional teaching methods has uncovered numerous benefits to distance learning.

BRINGING EDUCATION BACK TO THE FUTURE

Higher education in Quebec has significantly lagged behind other industries in moving toward a more digitally driven and tech-enabled environment. One measure of this is that most Quebec universities dedicate between 1.2% and 4.3% of their annual budgets to information and communication technology.² And in the years prior to the pandemic only 11.6%³ of all Quebec university students had some type of online course experience, with the rest only having been taught through traditional in-person lectures, which have changed little for hundreds of years.

But within one year, the proportion of students having had an experience with online learning has increased to virtually 100% in Quebec. Now that the groundwork for distance learning has been laid, Quebec universities have a unique opportunity to seize: becoming a North American benchmark



for distance learning in higher education—especially in the French language, given Montreal’s expertise in computer science and artificial intelligence.⁴ Doing so will not be without obstacles, as other countries and institutions are eyeing the same opportunity, but if done correctly, the benefits of pursuing such a goal far outweigh the related challenges.

CREATING PARTNERSHIPS IS THE KEY TO SUCCESS

For Quebec to become a leader in this area, policy-makers need to make distance learning a more central strategic priority in our higher education institutions. Introducing a more permanent model of distance learning in Quebec universities will require increased collaboration and the creation of strategic partnerships between schools and key private players in the online education industry. Such partnerships could help develop a more robust technology infrastructure to support distance learning and virtual interactions.

For such partnerships to be successful, however, Quebec universities and policy-makers must foster an environment that facilitates collaboration. In the past, administrative complexity was a significant barrier to the creation of alliances between Quebec companies and universities.⁵ We must embrace the governance processes that allowed for speed and agility in institutional decision-making during the pandemic.

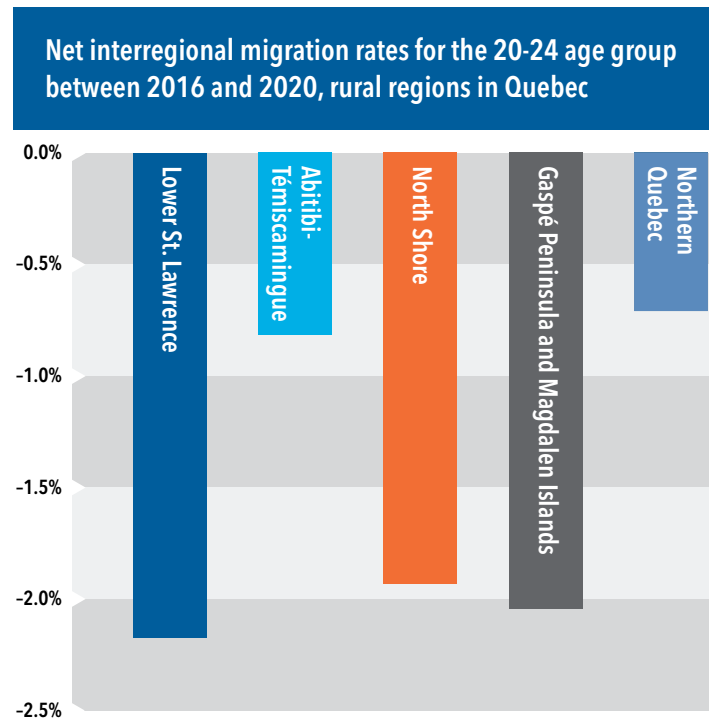
Beyond such strategic partnerships, institutions of higher education will need to restructure their present approach to the learning experience, establish new digital learning standards, and reimagine the compensation structure for professors. All of this, without excluding the possibility of having to form stronger relationships with entrepreneurs instead of existing institutions. Furthermore, they will need to determine which in-person activities truly add value for learners. The fields of study that require debate and discussion, such as philosophy or politics, may not be well suited for virtual learning; those that focus on quantitative information, like math, statistics, and languages, are better candidates.

EVERYONE CAN BENEFIT FROM THE DISRUPTION

While remote instruction was new to many, it has quickly demonstrated its advantages to all parties involved. For students near and far, distance learning has opened up possibilities for improving their higher education experience. They benefit from virtual learning by being able to attend courses regardless of their daily reality or geographical location. Maintaining the option of following a wide range of classes online in the future could help bridge the gap in educational attainment between regions in Quebec by increasing access to higher education, and thus help slow the exodus of young adults from rural areas.

Indeed, Quebec's most rural regions⁶ have been experiencing a net exodus of youths since at least 2001⁷ and recent data shows an average net loss of nearly 2% in most of these regions between 2016 and 2020 (see Figure 1). Unsurprisingly, one of the main motivations has been the unavailability of higher education programs.⁸ By offering a greater variety of online classes, as was done during the pandemic, students from rural regions could remain in their hometowns while attending university.

Figure 1



Source: Databank of Official Statistics on Québec, Statistics and publications, Population and demography, Migration, Internal migration, In-migrants, out-migrants, interregional net migration and corresponding rates by age group, administrative regions of Québec (January 14, 2021), consulted August 17, 2021.

In doing so, these students would continue to be active members of the local economy by working part-time, spending money locally, and perhaps even pursuing careers within the community after graduation. If there is a growing pool of skilled candidates residing in such regions, it could attract a larger number of companies to set up shop. Such new activity would in fact be beneficial to all regions in the province, especially since Quebec is the province with the most rapidly aging population in Canada.⁹

What's more, by eliminating the geographical barriers to enrollment in higher education, competition between universities will become fiercer. These institutions will need to compete harder to continue to attract and retain students, so the overall quality of education should increase.

For universities themselves, there are benefits in having a flexible attitude toward lessons and studying. Maintaining distance learning could allow institutions of higher learning to accommodate a greater number of students without having to increase classroom sizes. If students are learning remotely, or even using a hybrid system, there

could be a long-term reduction in the need to invest in campus equipment and infrastructure.

Because universities in Quebec receive the majority of their funding through government subsidies,¹⁰ a reduction in the cost of infrastructure maintenance would lighten the financial burden on taxpayers. In fact, government spending on Quebec universities has increased faster than student enrollment. And it is central administrative services that have received larger spending envelopes, rather than student services and instruction.¹¹ Taking inflation into account, government spending on universities has increased by 40% since 2004, while student enrollment increased by 20%.¹² Distance learning could help rebalance this by reducing the cost of higher education.

CONCLUSION

The present moment is likely to be remembered as a critical turning point between “pre-pandemic” days when analog on-campus learning was the default, to “post-pandemic” times when tech-enabled teaching is a pillar of competition between institutions. Quebec universities thus have a unique opportunity to seize in becoming a benchmark for distance learning in higher education. But our institutions will only experience a successful transition to the future of learning if strategic partnerships are formed with key players in the online learning industry, and if institutional decision-making is accelerated, as it has been, thanks to the accident of the pandemic, these past several months.

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