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Democratizing Access to an International Experience Through Digital Technology

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The internationalization of college education offers a world of possibilities to the student community and teaching teams. What if this enthusiasm for digital international activities enabled making this need to meet others even more accessible?

With globalization, increased migration and technological advances, citizens are increasingly in contact with people from other countries and cultures. "Globalization also drives companies to require their employees to be able to work with foreign partners or customers and to operate in multicultural environments" (Dear-dorff, 2006, p. 248). To meet these imperatives, many higher education institutions are involved in the internationalization process. This process has been defined differently by different authors, but the most widely used definition is that of Knight (2004), which states that an international, intercultural or global component should be incorporated into the goals, functions, services and governance of higher education institutions or systems. This process, based on the

exchange between (hence the prefix inter) nations or entities within them, can take the form of student or faculty mobility, recruitment and hosting of international students, international cooperation projects, exporting of know-how (such as offering degrees abroad), as well as the inclusion of an international perspective in study programs, notably through digital internationalization activities (DIA). While seeking to clarify all of this, this article pursues two objectives: first, to describe the characteristics of CEGEPs in which DIAs are developed, and second, to present globally networked learning environments (GNLEs) as a type of experience that is particularly promising for the democratization of international activities in the college system.

What are GNLEs?

GNLEs consist of the co-creation, by teachers from different countries, of a digital space for experiential and internationalized learning in which students collaborate on common projects. While completing the course's intended learning, they examine content through a global lens, and do so with greater sensitivity to geographic, linguistic, and cultural contexts (Bégin-Caouette, Khoo & Afridi, 2015).

The privilege of a minority

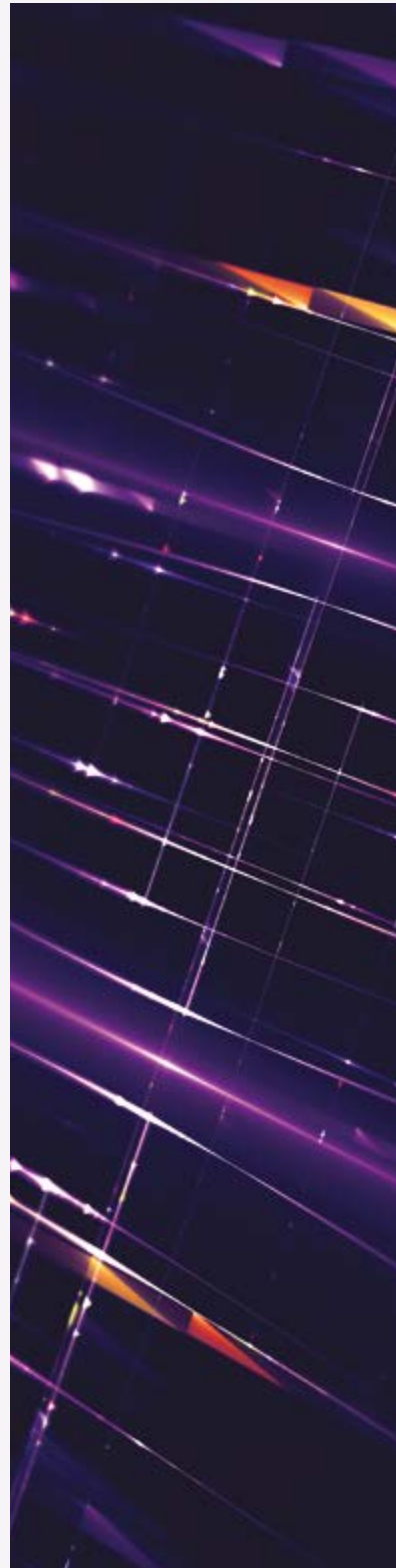
Like universities, many colleges prioritize internationalization. In 2019, 93% of CEGEPs mentioned internationalization in their strategic plan, and 84% of them had a manager dedicated wholly or in part to this process (Fédération des cégeps, 2020). Internationalization can be supported not only by economic and political motivations, but also by educational and sociocultural ones. A study by the Conseil supérieur de l'éducation (2021) noted that many CEGEP strategic plans emphasize the importance of developing students' openness to diversity by providing them with experiences abroad.

However, this type of international experience remains the privilege of a minority (Daly & Barker, 2010). Only 2.3% of CEGEP students participate in a mobility project each year (Fédération des cégeps, 2020). U.S. studies suggest that this minority is made up of white, younger students from affluent backgrounds, without any family obligations (Olsen, 2008; Martinez, Ranjeet & Marx, 2009), which raises important questions about equity, diversity, and inclusion. To date, there is no data on the socio-demographic profile of college students, but a study by Jobin-Lawler and Boutet-Lanouette (2012) of 490 students from 9 private colleges in Quebec revealed that 23% of these students had not participated in an international mobility project for financial reasons.

That being said, alternatives to physical mobility have multiplied with the expansion of distance education. Universities such as Université Laval, for example, have developed digital mobility programs (e-mobility) to

allow their students to take courses at other institutions. In addition to reducing travel costs (Altbach, Reisberg & Rumbley, 2009), these virtual exchanges, as Riauka (2021) notes, improve accessibility to an internationalized learning experience, particularly for students who are typically underrepresented in mobility programs. However, such activities are rarer in the college setting, where curricular structures make it complex for students to take a course abroad and receive credit for it in Quebec. Instead, colleges develop DIAs within existing courses and programs. The *Portrait des activités internationales des cégeps* [Overview of CEGEPs' International Activities, Ed.] (Fédération des cégeps, 2020) revealed that in 2018-2019, 27% of CEGEPs had identified at least one DIA.

However, the context of the recent global pandemic has changed the situation. First, travel restrictions have led to the abandonment of several outbound mobility projects. In the United States, NAFSA, the Association of International Educators (2020) reported that 94% of higher education institutions had reduced or cancelled their activities in 2020, a proportion that is similar in the CEGEP network (Poulin, Bégin-Caouette & Hazoume, 2022). Forcing the introduction of teleworking and distance education, the pandemic also encouraged institutions to increase the number of DIAs (de Wit & Altbach, 2021). A survey conducted by the International Association of Universities (Marinoni, Van't Land & Jensen, 2020) reported that 60% of the 424 universities surveyed had increased international virtual initiatives because of COVID-19. Interestingly, 56% of institutions in the Americas and 49% of those in Africa



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have also developed the infrastructure necessary for such virtual initiatives.

Portrait of digital international activities

This article aims, first, to study the characteristics of CEGEPs in which DIAs are being developed. To do so, we rely on data from the *Portrait des activités internationales des cégeps* (Fédération des cégeps, 2020), which was drawn from a questionnaire that was sent in the spring of 2019 to the international advisors of the 48 CEGEPs in the network (98% response rate). The questionnaire included more than 100 questions on international activities (mobility, recruitment, export of know-how and internationalization of programs) and on the governance

and organization of these activities in the CEGEPs. **Table 1** presents more specifically the types of DIAs that have been implemented in 12 CEGEPs (some of which have instituted more than one type of DIA). Although the data predate the pandemic, they remain relevant to understanding the characteristics of institutions that were best prepared to deploy a range of DIAs in spring 2020 and that, today, possibly remain benchmark models. During the 2018-2019 academic year, 12 CEGEPs implemented at least one DIA and some had more than one. Indeed, at nine institutions, at least one teacher had organized group discussions between their students and peers from another country; and at six CEGEPs, at least one teacher had offered a collaborative class session with a colleague from abroad.

Table 1 **Number of CEGEPs with DIAs in place (2018-2019)**

Types of DIAs	Number of CEGEPs
Group discussions, synchronous or asynchronous, between CEGEP students and students from another country	9
Class sessions offered in collaboration with two teachers, from a CEGEP and from another country	6
Work done in teams by students from different countries ¹	4
Work done separately but presented to all	3
Virtual joint conference by a guest speaker	1

¹ This type of DIA corresponds to the definition of GNLE.

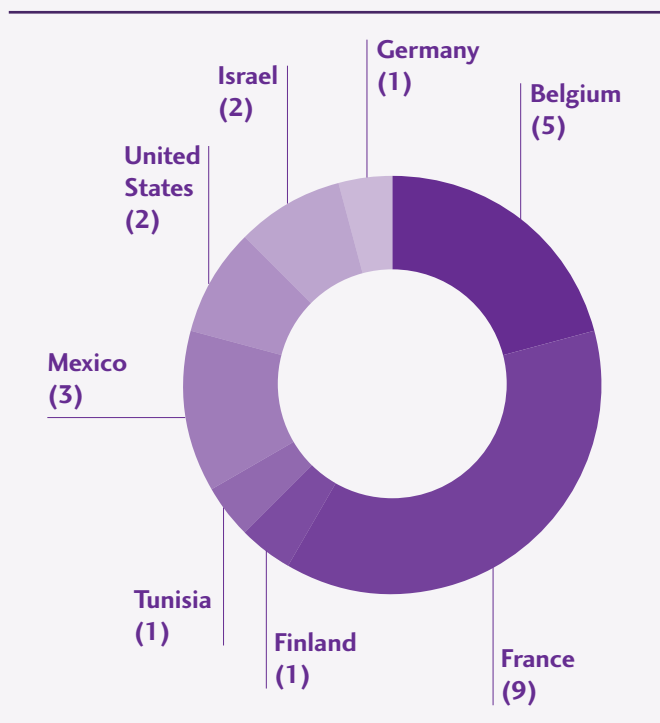
A total of 799 CEGEP students (or 0.46% of the student body) participated in these activities. In terms of disciplines, the data suggest that all of these activities were developed in regular CEGEP programs, including general education, pre-university programs (Arts, Letters and Communication, Humanities and Science) and technical programs (Accounting and Management, Civil Engineering Technology and Industrial Design). As shown in **Figure 1**, few DIAs appear to be conducted with partners from emerging countries, which could be explained, in part, by the availability of technological infrastructure. However, the situation may have changed as institutions in several emerging

countries have consolidated this infrastructure (Marinoni, Van't Land & Jensen, 2020).

As **Table 2** shows, when we compare institutions by language of instruction, more Francophone institutions than Anglophone institutions report at least one digital international activity, but it should be noted that the latter have, on average, more activities involving a larger number of students. To date, there are no studies that compare DIAs at Francophone and Anglophone colleges that could explain this difference. Thus, it would be relevant for researchers and practitioners to investigate this in the future. A comparison by institutional

size reveals that digital international activities are more common in large and small colleges than in medium-sized colleges. To explain this result, we could hypothesize that larger CEGEPs can rely on more resources (including pedagogical counsellors and international education professionals) which would facilitate the implementation of these types of initiatives. In the case of smaller CEGEPs, this result may be correlated with the region in which the CEGEP is located. Indeed, when we compare CEGEPs by region, it is interesting to note that CEGEPs in rural areas have the greatest number of these activities and the greatest number of students participating. While a previous study

Figure 1 Main partner countries of CEGEP teachers



(Bégin-Caouette, 2013) showed that, compared to other regions, a lower proportion of students participated in outbound mobility projects in rural CEGEPs, the data suggest that DIAs may be a relevant alternative for institutions located further away from major centres.

Table 2 CEGEP characteristics, number of DIAs and number of students (2018-2019)

Characteristics of CEGEPs	% of CEGEPs with at least one DIA	Total number of DIAs	Total number of CEGEP students
Language			
Francophone	25%	21	619
Anglophone	4%	6	180
Size			
Small	10%	7	160
Medium	4%	4	160
Large	15%	16	479

GNLEs: A digital collaboration initiative

While digital internationalization democratizes access to an international experience, not all activities in this category necessarily generate the same impact on students or even teachers. Some studies suggest, for example, that activities that encourage collaboration—through digital means—between students from different countries contribute more to the development of their intercultural competencies, which would be the case for GNLEs. Thus, we will explain

how GNLEs can be a particularly promising type of activity for the Quebec college network.

Collaboration is essential at all stages of a GNLE, as the activity is first developed and facilitated jointly by two teachers and, in some cases, these individuals jointly evaluate the students' work. Collaboration is also concomitant with the participation of students who, with the help of technology, must carry out the activity in teams with peers from another country and thus learn to work in different time zones, with various technologies,

while becoming aware of cultural differences and developing their language skills.

The majority of studies on GNLEs come from the United States and have been conducted in universities. Nevertheless, they suggest that GNLEs promote the development of intercultural, language, and digital competencies of students and teachers (Appiah-Kubi & Ebenezer, 2020; O'Brien & Erikson, 2008; Wilson, 2013). For example, nursing faculty at the University of Washington Bothell (USA) and the University of Santo

Tomas (Philippines) created a GNLE to develop both knowledge and attitudes relevant to nursing practice and to foster communication as well as professional collaboration among students. They grouped students into transnational teams to co-author texts on a variety of issues, including the nursing profession in both countries (De Castro *et al.*, 2019). For the authors, this experience increased the employability and socioprofessional insertion of future nurses in multicultural work environments. Custer and Tuominen (2016), who conducted one of the few studies at the (U.S.) college level, described a co-constructed GNLE in a sociology course offered to students from a U.S. community college and a Japanese institution. Each session focused on a different theme, and students were invited to discuss it in a forum. Results of a questionnaire distributed to the students suggest that these exchanges contributed to the development of intercultural skills.

In Quebec, Vanier College is a forerunner in virtual collaborative teaching. As early as 2006, teachers from Vanier College and Cégep de Sept-Îles shared a course (called *Worldviews*) in which their students participated in interactive (bilingual) activities using information technology (Coyle, 2017). One year, for example, the Sept-Îles students were required to view the film *Mambo Italiano*, which the Vanier students felt represented their environment and culture well. The Vanier students, on the other hand, were asked to watch *La Grande séduction*, which was a good representation of the Sept-Îles students' world. Synchronous discussions allowed them to compare their points of view and, ultimately, to produce a joint oral presentation on

cultural similarities and differences, all with the objective of fostering openness to others, intercultural sensitivity and dialogue. Building on these successes, Vanier teachers subsequently partnered with colleagues from other colleges (Heritage, Champlain, and Victoriaville), as well as with colleagues from the United States, India, and Mexico, making these virtual collaborative teaching initiatives true GNLEs (Flacks, 2017; Loewen, 2013; Vanier College, 2014). In the *Worldviews* course, for example, teachers from all four countries chose a culturally charged theme (such as death, freedom, diversity, and gender equality), invited a speaker to give a talk to the students, and then encouraged a group discussion involving all students that allowed them to compare worldviews and belief systems to highlight their purposes and functions, as well as to understand how these views influence different aspects of everyday life in different cultures.

A study by Bégin-Caouette *et al.* (2015) also cites the example of other GNLEs, including one co-created by a Franco-phone CEGEP teacher of industrial design and a Barcelona-based teacher of sociology. In this course, teams of Catalan students had to design a product that addressed an environmental issue and those of the associated Quebec team had to develop the prototype related to this product. During one session, the teams communicated with each other virtually to refine their understanding of the process of moving from design to product creation. The authors of this study suggest that GNLEs can be an opportunity for professional development. Indeed, through collaborations with international partners, and with the support of their insti-

tution and colleagues, the CEGEP teachers interviewed had increased their mastery of various technological tools, had deepened their understanding of educational systems in other countries, and had been able to learn from the pedagogical practices of their international partners.

What future for GNLEs in the college system?

Technological advances, environmental concerns, and the COVID-19 pandemic have profoundly transformed our relationship to internationalization. In this context, proposals such as GNLEs, which require a more sustained level of collaboration from both staff and students, are more valued. In the United States, for example, a study by Cossey and Fischer (2021) found that during the pandemic, 30% of community colleges surveyed had or were in the process of creating a GNLE. We do not yet have similar data for Quebec, but there are examples that suggest that more GNLEs were developed during the pandemic. A particularly telling case is that of the Cégep de Lévis (2022), where students in the Videography option of the Arts, Letters and Communication program, are required to produce an audiovisual production abroad. However, during the pandemic, the international student office had to suspend mobility projects. The teacher, Dominique Legendre, therefore joined forces with a colleague who teaches film at the University of Mexico in Cuernavaca to develop an activity in which students from both countries participated in a dozen virtual meetings. These encounters led to the production of reports on the students' respective cultures and



exchanges on these reports (i.e., the Mexican students reported on Mexican culture and the Quebec students on Quebec culture). According to the institution, this GNLE allowed teachers and students to open up to the world without having to travel abroad.

The context of the pandemic was also an opportunity for four researchers from three Quebec universities to join forces with the Direction des affaires internationales (DAI) of the Fédération des cégeps to launch a call for projects in November 2021 to co-develop GNLEs in CEGEPs and evaluate their impact on students and teachers.² Taking advantage of the digital infrastructures that were developed during the pandemic and the revision of certain college programs, the DAI considers that GNLEs are a way to contribute to the internationalization of programs of study, to increase access to international experience, to maintain international partnerships and to strengthen the reputation of the Quebec college sector (Poulin, Bégin-Caouette & Hazoume,

2022). Six GNLE projects have been selected in four colleges (Ahuntsic, Édouard-Montpetit, La Pocatière and Montmorency) and cover programs in Administration, Avionics, Special Care Counselling, Paralegal Technology, Museum Techniques as well as general education (French and foreign literature). At the Cégep de La Pocatière, a teacher in Special Care Counselling and a partner from the École nationale des solidarités, de l'encadrement et de l'intervention sociale (ENSEIS) in France will set up a GNLE in which students from both countries will participate in virtual intervention simulations in order to develop their clinical judgment from an intercultural perspective (Bégin-Caouette, Desrochers & Berthiaume, 2022). A teacher in Administration at Collège Montmorency would like to work with an international partner so that students from both countries can work together in a transnational team to diagnose a company's customer service and suggest ways to improve it (Poulin, Bégin-Caouette & Hazoume, 2022).

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² For more information: [lires.ca/mari].



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All of these examples are indicative of the new face of internationalization at the college level. For digital internationalization to take root in institutions and contribute to the intercultural competencies of students and the professional development of teaching teams, however, a community of practice will need to be established that will allow teachers, administrators and professionals to share experiences, educational resources and best practices related to GNLEs, as well as to receive training and even consulting services. While the State University of New York's COIL Global Network has been instrumental in disseminating and institutionalizing GNLEs in English-language (primarily university) institutions (Rubin, 2017), it is important for various

stakeholders in the college network to come together to develop and promote expertise that is adapted to the specific context of Quebec. The projects involving university and college co-researchers, as well as those of the four CEGEPs mentioned above and the Fédération des cégeps,³ will allow for the emergence of such a community of practice, which will ultimately include the other stakeholders in the college network. ■

³ University co-researchers: Olivier Bégin-Cauette (Université de Montréal), Sébastien Béland (Université de Montréal), Marie-Josée Goulet (Université du Québec en Outaouais) and Nicole Lacasse (Université Laval). College co-researchers: Daniel Berthiaume (Collège Montmorency), Samuel Fournier St-Laurent (Collège Ahuntsic) and Simon Morin (Collège Montmorency).



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