

# Aubin: Students' premise is wrong

BY HENRY AUBIN, THE GAZETTE JUNE 8, 2012



MONTREAL, QUE.: MAY 25, 2012--Léo Bureau-Blouin, president of FECQ (left to right), Martine Desjardins, president of FEUQ and CLASSE spokesman Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois wait for their lawyer as the students groups and labour unions announce they will file a legal challenge to Quebec's Bill 78, at the courthouse in Montreal on Friday May 25, 2012.

**Photograph by:** Allen McInnis, Montreal Gazette

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Every protest movement embraces the premise that something is wrong in society. One of the anti-tuition movement's stated premises is that Quebecers attend university far less than [Canadians generally](#). You hear it [everywhere](#). It's become [conventional wisdom](#).

The movement blames tuition fees for this wrong, and it says an increase in fees will deter still more people from pursuing their [education](#). The student groups insist the solution to this "social injustice" is to freeze tuition or even to abolish it outright.

Yet the premise itself – that Quebecers are laggards in going to university – appears to be dead wrong.

Skeptical? If so, I don't blame you. We tend to take Statistics Canada as gospel, and its widely quoted [figures](#) show that the portion of people going to university in Quebec – a meagre 20 per cent – is the

second lowest among provinces.

But bear two things in mind:

Most university students in Quebec come from CEGEP, which means they normally spend only three years getting a bachelor's degree, not four years as in the rest of Canada. That automatically gives other provinces more students at any point in time.

Says respected economist Pierre Fortin: "Once you adjust for this simple interprovincial difference, Quebec's participation rate is about the same as Ontario's (27 per cent in the StatsCan study)."

The other problem with StatsCan's ranking is that it concerns a cohort age 18 to 24 attending university during an average year (during the period between 2003-04 and 2005-06). It would be fairer, says Fortin, to measure the extent to which people attend university from their teens to their mid-30s. "This calculation is quite obviously the one that matters if one really wants to measure accessibility to university."

Using this criteria, Quebec's [education ministry finds](#) that 42 per cent of the young generation was registered in a bachelor's program during the 2005-06 school year – more than twice the level in the StatsCan study. In 2010-11, the share nudged up to 44.7 per cent. Quebec is thus overcoming its history of earlier generations' weak attendance at universities.

Using his own independent research (based on StatsCan population data), Fortin figures that Quebec's participation rate is well above the national average.

In short, Fortin's method of reckoning blows away the supposed absolute truth that, when it comes to university participation, young Quebecers are suffering. They're not laggards in entering university; they're among the leaders.

To be sure, financial reasons may still have kept some disadvantaged Quebecers from pursuing their studies in the very recent past. The province's beefing up of its financial-aid plan in May, however, should all but end that problem.

So, you're asking, is there really a problem in obtaining a degree?

Yes, absolutely.

The sad reality is that even though almost half of young Quebecers register as undergrads, the dropout rate among them is, as I wrote [Tuesday](#), scandalous. In 2009, according to the ministry's figures, 32 per cent of them left school without getting a diploma. The problem has existed for decades. Fortin says the rate is more than twice as high as in the rest of Canada.

As a professor at l'Université du Québec à Montréal, Fortin has seen this dropout phenomenon close up. When I ask him the causes, he suggests three, and tuition is not among them:

The bigger the student body becomes, the more money a university gets from Quebec. Schools thus

often recruit even those who can't hack it.

Students often graduate from CEGEP several years late. (Only 44 per cent of them get their pre-university diploma in the prescribed two years.) Result: "This might lead to more dropout behaviour. Older students are less keen on continuing to study."

Pedagogical support might be inadequate, since academic pressures make many profs prioritize research over teaching.

The protest movement claims there's a crisis in accessibility. It's a myth – a bogus premise. The real problem is the dropout rate.

And, to judge by the disruption that the boycott of classes is inflicting on students' academic careers, the movement could very well make that problem even more serious.

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