

## Stakeholder summary

### Francophone peer mentorship program eases the transition to postsecondary education

As North America's largest bilingual (English-French) postsecondary institution, the University of Ottawa enrolls significant numbers of anglophone and francophone students from across Canada and internationally. Most of its students, however, come from across Ontario, often from communities that are linguistically and culturally diverse.

Two key areas of the university's mandate are to promote French culture and help Ontario's francophone communities flourish. Francophone students from minoritized communities (where French speakers make up less than 5% of the population) often face social and academic integration challenges during their first year of study as they try to fit into the university culture.

#### Project description

*Linguistic Heterogeneity and Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education in Ontario*, a report published by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), explores two initiatives created by the university to better understand the challenges faced by francophone students at the institution as well as the role of language courses on student success. As a pilot initiative for the 2011-12 cohort of students, the regional peer mentoring program paired 211 incoming and upper-year students from the same communities with the goal of better integrating students socially and academically into the university. These students were from northeastern, central and southwestern Ontario, as well as New Brunswick.

The second initiative was a quantitative analysis to better understand the role of language courses on student success, both before entering university and while attending. The study focused primarily on direct-entry Ontario francophone undergraduate students.

#### Findings

Francophone students from minoritized communities faced many challenges during their first year of study. Students had problems making friends, navigating the campus and living on their own. Time management and adjusting to university courses were the most cited academic challenges. Many francophone students felt that there was a knowledge gap between them and their peers, particularly those that had more advanced French-language training.

A number of students experienced insecurities with their French skills in social situations in the classroom. Some students felt that their accent was not the one valued at the university – that the university favoured a more academic French than they were used to. Some mentors saw students question their identities as francophones, while others felt that individuals at the university were not as open to students' varying accents or writing styles. Students received negative comments about their accents, syntax and choice of expressions when speaking or on writing assignments.

Despite these challenges, when surveyed in January 2012, 80% of students felt at ease being a francophone at the university. Students saw the peer mentoring program as an essential part of their university experience, particularly easing the transition into postsecondary education.

The quantitative analysis revealed that the quality of academic preparation in secondary school, especially performance in the Grade 12 pre-university French course, was a major determinant of success at the university level, as was the school board of origin. The authors caution, however, that there are many other factors that influence success and that more work needs to be done to better understand them.

*Linguistic Heterogeneity and Non-Traditional Pathways to Postsecondary Education in Ontario* was written by Sylvie A. Lamoureux, Victoria Diaz, Alain Malette, Pierre Mercier, Jean-Luc Daoust, Johanne Bordages, Karine Turner and Megan Cotnam-Kappel, University of Ottawa.