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French-speaking Ontario College Applicants' Preferences and Pathways

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Ontario colleges were established to help prepare students for jobs through applied programming tied to local labour markets. Graduates of Ontario colleges play essential roles in supporting and improving Ontarians' economic and social well being, and they have strong employment and earnings outcomes. In conjunction with this college context, Ontario is home to one of the largest proportions of people bilingual in English and French in Canada¹ at around 11% of the provincial population, which is over 1.5 million people (Canadian Heritage, 2024). At the intersection of these two matters, there is limited current research on French-speaking learners in Ontario colleges: What are their college pathways, and what factors influence their decisions? Understanding applicant pathways is important as colleges and government consider how to support French-speaking learners' access and success at a time of heightened fiscal constraint.

Previous research focused on how French education in kindergarten through Grade 12 (K-12) shaped high school student preferences for postsecondary education (PSE) more generally, but their PSE enrolment choices were not explored (Allard et al., 2009; Foster, 1998; R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2017; Schafer, 2013). HEQCO's recent work on postsecondary decision making among French-speaking students in Ontario revealed that program offerings were a key influence among those who chose to attend bilingual and English postsecondary institutions (Courts et al., 2025). This study extends earlier research and explores French-speaking applicant preferences and pathways in Ontario colleges. We used applicant survey and administrative data to analyze applicants' demographic characteristics, college language, field of study, program choices and the motivations behind their college decisions. The data revealed a clear French school board (FSB) to French college pathway with a recent increase in interest in English colleges. We also found that French-speaking applicants were most influenced by factors such as program offerings and employment prospects, and their most frequently selected programs were connected to labour market needs. Our findings can help government and colleges support the educational goals of Ontario's French-speaking learners.

¹ According to Statistics Canada's 2021 Census, there are greater proportions of bilingual people in Quebec (47%), New Brunswick (34%) and the Yukon (14%) (Canadian Heritage, 2024).



Historical Landscape of Ontario Colleges' Language(s) of Instruction

It was not always possible for Ontarians to pursue college studies in French. Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology in Ontario were designed with an access mandate in 1965: To offer local training options to prepare graduates for the workforce and to address the needs of learners not served by universities (Government of Ontario, 2024a; MacKay, 2014). Ontario college programming was initially delivered only in English and Ontario has never had bilingual (English and French) colleges. Prior to the establishment of French colleges in the 1990s, eight English colleges, primarily in Northern and Eastern Ontario, offered bilingual² programs,³ mainly in business, humanities, health, arts, social science and education (BHASE).⁴

Advocacy for enhanced French-language service provision led to the 1986 *French Language Services Act* (FLSA) that ensures Ontarians' right to receive government services in French (Government of Ontario, 2024b). The FLSA applies to government agencies as well as institutions that receive public funding, including publicly assisted colleges (Government of Ontario, 2024b). The first French college in Ontario, La Cité collégiale,⁵ was established in 1989 in Ottawa and had its first cohort of students in 1990 (Ontario Colleges, n.d.; Vie française capitale, 2024). Most French and bilingual programs at English colleges were subsequently cancelled, and most French-speaking staff at English colleges transferred to the new French college (Vie française capitale, 2024).

² The Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security's (MCURES) Approved Program Schedule (APS) table was used to create an inventory of historically bilingual programs at English colleges. The APS table is an administrative file maintained by MCURES that is updated on an annual basis. This file lists all active, funded college programs offered by publicly assisted colleges alongside their respective program titles and MTCU codes. It also includes the start and cancel dates of inactive programs. MTCU codes are 5-digit codes used to classify approved college programs for funding and quality assurance purposes (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, 2024).

³ Two English colleges in Eastern Ontario offered French-language programs before the establishment of the first French college (Vie française capitale, 2024). Most bilingual programs at English colleges were active between 1980 and 1995, but they were offered as early as 1979 and as late as 2007.

⁴ Over 80% of bilingual programs at English colleges were in BHASE.

⁵ In 2013, the college changed its name to Collège La Cité (Vie française capitale, 2024).



Collège La Cité is primarily an Eastern Ontario institution with its main campus in Ottawa, a Skilled Trades Institute in Orléans⁶ and a satellite campus in Hawkesbury⁷ (Ontario Colleges, n.d.). It also has campus locations in Hearst and Toronto (Ontario Colleges, n.d.). As of fall 2024, Collège La Cité offers 126 programs: 76% in BHASE and 24% in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).⁸ Collège Boréal, a second French-language college, was established in Sudbury in 1995 (Collège Boréal, 2024). As of fall 2024, Collège Boréal has 8 campus locations with 37 sites in all regions of Ontario and offers 60 programs: 90% in BHASE and 10% in STEM (Collège Boréal, 2024).

The Impact of K-12 French Education on PSE Choices

The pathway to French-language PSE is shaped, in part, by the availability of K-12 French education across the province. In Ontario, there are four publicly funded school systems,⁹ including French public, French Catholic, English public and English Catholic (Ministry of Education, 2024a). More than 480 French-language elementary and high schools exist across twelve French school boards¹⁰ (Ministry of Education, 2024a). In Ontario, schools in FSBs teach the curriculum exclusively in French.¹¹ Schools in English school boards (ESBs) teach the curriculum in English, and they may offer three types of French as a second language programs¹² (from greatest to least French-language instruction): French immersion, extended French and core French (Ministry of Education, 2024b).¹³ A 2025 HEQCO report found that student survey respondents who

⁶ Orléans is a community in Ottawa located in the east end of the city along the Ottawa River.

⁷ Hawkesbury is a town located between Ottawa and Montréal.

⁸ In the fall of 2024, both French college websites were scanned to create an inventory of current program offerings. Programs were coded by BHASE or STEM and adhered to Statistics Canada's (2018) groupings.

⁹ See Appendix, Table 1.

¹⁰ There are 74 public school boards in Ontario (Ministry of Education, 2024c).

¹¹ Exceptions include international language courses, English, Indigenous languages curricula and langue des signes québécoise (Quebec Sign Language) (Ministry of Education, 2024a).

¹² See Appendix, Table 2.

¹³ In all French as a second language programs, French is taught as a subject. Core French is mandatory for ESB students from Grades 4 to Grade 8, and they must obtain at least one French high school credit. Additional subjects are taught with French instruction in extended French and French immersion programs—at least 25% and 50% in elementary school, respectively (Ministry of Education, 2024b).



had greater exposure to French in their K-12 education reported greater confidence and inclination to pursue PSE in French (Courts et al., 2025). Survey respondents who attended a French-language high school were the only K-12 demographic, at 11%, to report a preference for French-only PSE (Courts et al., 2025). A Government of Ontario (Gouvernement de l'Ontario, 2011) report explains how French-language postsecondary institutions are important for the continuity of French education from elementary to secondary and PSE, and benefit the overall preservation of French language and culture.

Research supports the observation that K-12 French education directly influences high school students' linguistic confidence and preference for French PSE. (R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2017; Schafer, 2013; Vanderveen, 2015). Researchers also noted that insecurities with spoken French among French immersion students and graduates are compounded in English-majority jurisdictions, with fewer opportunities to use French outside of school (Foster, 1998; Schafer 2013; Vanderveen, 2015). R. A. Malatest and Associates Ltd. (2017)¹⁴ also found that low marks in French negatively influenced students' decision to pursue PSE in French for about half of ESB students, but not for FSB students. This study also revealed a greater preference for French PSE among FSB students and a greater preference for English PSE among ESB students.

Social and Cultural Influences Among French-speaking Ontarians in PSE

Sociocultural factors, such as linguistic and cultural identity, also play an important role in French-speaking students' PSE experiences and decisions. Samson and colleagues' (2021) research on French college students in Ontario revealed that a strong sense of Francophone identity helped students feel more connected and resilient in an English-dominant setting, contributing positively to their adaptation to college life and overall life satisfaction. Labrie and Lamoureux's (2016) research highlights the perspectives and experiences of Francophone postsecondary students in Ontario. Many Francophone students expressed a strong desire to maintain their Francophone identity and were

¹⁴ This study included perspectives from Grade 11 and Grade 12 students from FSBs and ESBs in Central and Southwestern Ontario. ESB students were enrolled in French immersion or extended French programs.



motivated by a sense of cultural pride and a desire to contribute to the vitality of the Francophone community. However, some students felt pressure to assimilate into English-speaking environments. In some cases, students chose programs based on language availability rather than personal or professional interests. In this study, we report French-speaking applicants' college choices based on survey and administrative data. Future research would be necessary to understand the role of social and cultural influences in applicants' decisions.

Research Questions and Methodology

This report uses two OCAS¹⁵ data sources: administrative data from 2019 to 2023 and Applicant Experience Survey (AES) data from 2024 to explore the following research questions:

- Who are French-speaking college applicants in Ontario? What are their college pathways?
- What preferences and factors shape their college decision making?

Administrative data from 2019 to 2023 contained applicants' demographic information and their application and confirmation decisions. As part of the application process, OCAS collects information from applicants, including their age, gender, school board name and preferred language (English or French). Our definition of "French-speaking" included applicants who selected French as their preferred language.¹⁶ These demographic details provided information about who French-speaking applicants are. In

¹⁵ OCAS is a not-for-profit organization focused on creating new pathways for applicants to explore and connect with Ontario's 24 public colleges, and on delivering tools and services that support college partners.

¹⁶ Since 2009, the Government of Ontario has used an "Inclusive Definition of Francophone," which includes "individuals whose mother tongue is French" and "individuals who are neither French nor English but have a particular knowledge of French as an official language and use French at home most often" (Ministry of Francophone Affairs, 2024a). However, we use "French-speaking" and "French speakers" to capture the individuals in the government's definition in addition to individuals who learned French in school or other contexts and may not speak French at home. Further, we analyzed college applicants' self-selection of French as their language of preference in their college applications as a way to capture French speakers. We acknowledge that our analysis may exclude French-speaking applicants whose preferred language was English.



addition, administrative data included all applications (up to five¹⁷) submitted per French-speaking applicant from 2019 to 2023. Applicants ranked their program choices (1–5), and first-rank choices were analyzed to understand applicants' preferred college language. The analysis focused on unique applicants (n=25,392), not application numbers.¹⁸ These data also revealed French-speaking applicants' college pathways (college language and program choices¹⁹) over time. Descriptive statistics were produced using Stata 18.

2024 AES data provided additional information about French-speaking applicants' high school French education, as well as their college language preference and influential factors in their application and confirmation decisions. Every spring, OCAS conducts the AES to better understand applicants' preferences and experiences as they prepare to enrol in an Ontario college. The survey is sent to all applicants for a given academic year who provided consent to be contacted. The 2024 AES was sent out to applicants who applied as early as October 2023 for the 2024-25 academic year.²⁰ OCAS links confidential survey responses to application files containing basic demographic information. Data from applicants who completed the 2024 AES and indicated their preferred language was French (n=644) in their OCAS application were used in this analysis. Descriptive statistics were produced using Stata 18.²¹

¹⁷ Each applicant can apply to a maximum of five programs at a time, with a maximum of three choices for any single college.

¹⁸ There was a total of 69,576 applications among applicants who selected French as their preferred language in the 2019 to 2023 period. Our analysis focused on unique applicants (n=25,392) to understand French-speaking applicant behaviours over time.

¹⁹ Each program was coded by BHASE or STEM (according to Statistics Canada, 2018) to comment on field of study trends over time.

²⁰ In June 2024, OCAS invited 97,000 applicants to participate in the AES and received 10,907 responses. The online survey was administered in English and French.

²¹ While the AES offers information about French-speaking applicants' preferences, it may not represent French-speaking college student perspectives if applicants did not ultimately enrol in college.



Findings

Applicant Age and K-12 French Education

Between 2019 and 2023, most French-speaking applicants (95%²²) attended high schools in FSBs.²³ There was a similar pattern among 2024 AES respondents whose preferred language was French: 83%²⁴ attended French-language schools, while the remaining 17% pursued French as a second language programming (15% in French immersion and 2% in extended French). The average age of French-speaking applicants was 27,²⁵ which is similar to Colleges Ontario's (2022) finding that the average age of an Ontario college applicant was 25.²⁶ Indirect entry to Ontario colleges is prevalent with 77% of college applicants applying indirectly in 2021-22 (Colleges Ontario, 2022).²⁷ The number of French-speaking applicants increased in both the 25–34 and 35+ age groups (66% and 43% respectively) from 2019 through 2023. There was also a greater proportion of female and gender-diverse²⁸ French-speaking applicants aged 25 and older.²⁹

²² This is a five-year average from the 2019 to 2023 period.

²³ Note that for this finding, n=9,425. School board information was not available for all applicants, which may be attributed to out-of-province applicants or indirect applicants who were not enrolled at an Ontario high school at the time of application. Note also that the 2024 AES and the 2019–2023 administrative file did not include international applicants. Administrative data included the school board name, which was grouped by school board language (English or French) using the Ontario public school board inventory (Ministry of Education, 2024c). Additionally, administrative data did not include French-speaking applicants' participation in French as a second language programs in ESBs.

²⁴ Note that for this finding, n=266 because this survey question had a 50% response rate.

²⁵ For age group distribution, see Appendix, Table 4.

²⁶ Note that this finding pertains to Ontario college applicants generally, not French-speaking applicants exclusively. Colleges Ontario (2022) cites OCAS as the source of the statistic, but the academic year was not specified.

²⁷ This finding also pertains to Ontario college applicants generally, not French-speaking applicants exclusively. This percentage is based on Colleges Ontario's analysis of OCAS data for the 2021-22 academic year, although they note that the numbers were preliminary as of May 2022.

²⁸ Administrative data (2019–2023) included applicants' self-reported gender: "female," "male" or "other." The "other" gender category included applicants who did not report their gender or reported a non-binary gender. The cell sizes for the "other" gender category were very small. The "female" and "other" gender categories were combined to prevent the accidental disclosure of applicants. Findings related to gender are reported by two categories: "female and gender-diverse" and "male."

²⁹ Forty-nine percent of female and gender-diverse French-speaking applicants were 25 and older (See Appendix, Table 5). Thirty-nine percent of male French-speaking applicants were 25 and older (See



Factors Influencing College Choice

Program offerings and French-language instruction were the most influential college choice factors selected by 2024 AES respondents (see Figure 1). Among those who applied to multiple colleges,³⁰ 21% said the program was the main reason for choosing which college to confirm. These findings demonstrate that while learning in French is considered important, French-speaking applicants placed the greatest importance on program offerings. This finding supports previous research that found program offerings to be influential for Ontario college students in general³¹ (Jafar & Legusov, 2020; Lang, 2009; Pander-Scott, 2009; Toor, 2020).

2024 AES respondents confirmed the importance of college reputation and location. Previous research highlights the importance of postsecondary institution reputation, location and cost-of-living considerations for French-speaking students in Ontario (Office of the French Language Service Commissioner, 2012; R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2017). Provincial government reports illustrate the challenges many students face, particularly those in Southwestern and Central Ontario, who have increased expenses if they choose to attend French-language postsecondary institutions out of commuting distance³² (Harrison, 2023; Office of the French Language Service Commissioner, 2012).

Appendix, Table 6). These are five-year averages from the 2019 to 2023 period. To explore additional findings related to gender, see Appendix, Tables 3, 5 and 6.

³⁰ Note that for this finding, n=561 because this survey question had an 87% response rate. Twenty-four percent of French-speaking applicants did not apply to multiple programs. Among the 76% who did apply to multiple programs, 21% (n=118) selected “program” as the main reason for confirming their college offer.

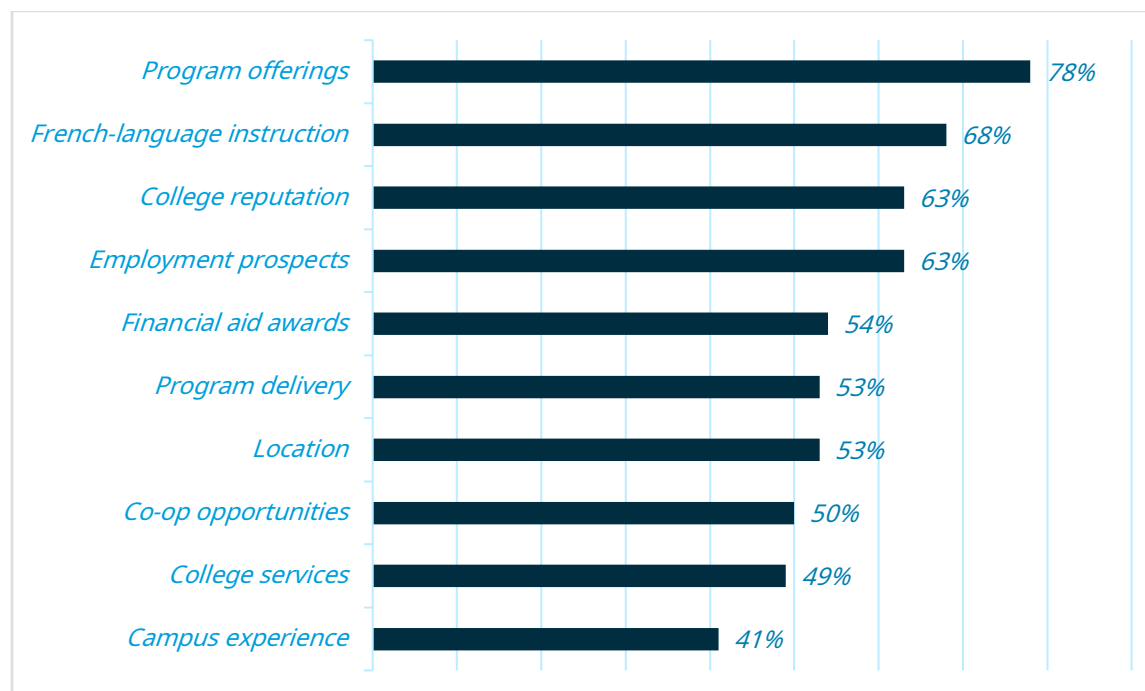
³¹ Both domestic and international student findings on program offerings are included since this factor is influential across student populations.

³² Eighty kilometres and greater is considered “out-of-commuting distance” (Frenette, 2003). Living too far from a Canadian college (compared to a university) is, generally, less of an issue because colleges have a strong presence in rural communities (Frenette, 2003). While there are only two French colleges in Ontario, there are several campus locations throughout the province.



Figure 1

Which Factors are Most Influential When Choosing Which Colleges to Apply To?



Source: OCAS 2024 AES

Note: n=644. These results are in response to the question: "Please rate the following [factors] according to their importance when choosing which colleges to apply to." Response options included "very influential, somewhat influential, a little influential and not at all influential." This figure presents the percentage of respondents who reported factors as "very influential" when deciding which colleges to apply to.

2024 AES respondents chose colleges with jobs in mind. Nearly two-thirds of respondents selected employment prospects as very influential. 2024 AES results align with previous research that found that Ontario college student decision making is rooted in concerns for finding and securing a job after graduation. For example, researchers found that Ontario college students were drawn to the applied nature of programs and the expectation of improved employment opportunities (Jafar & Legusov, 2020; Toor, 2020). Other studies found that Ontario college student choices were shaped by considerations such as program linkages to the labour market, connection to previous study or work experience and professional advancement or career changes (Jafar & Legusov, 2020; Pander-Scott, 2009).



The competitive edge of English-French bilingualism³³ in the labour market can also bolster employment opportunities (Henningsmoen & Rice, 2022; R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd., 2017). Although 11% of Ontario's population is bilingual in English and French, some employers struggle to recruit French-speaking workers (Canadian Heritage, 2024; Lord, 2022; Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development, 2024). Statistics Canada's (2023) Canadian Survey on Business Conditions found that 16% of Ontario businesses that offer bilingual services expected recruiting bilingual employees to be a significant challenge. There is clear demand for French-speaking workers in the province. For example, in 2023, outside of Quebec, the greatest proportion of online job postings that required bilingualism in English and French in Canada was in Ontario (56%)³⁴ (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2023). Jobs requiring bilingualism often provide higher earnings (Diaz, 2019; Henningsmoen & Rice, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2022³⁵). In Ontario, the pay premium for English-French bilingualism can be as high as 30% (Henningsmoen & Rice, 2022). Together, labour market demand and compensation premiums could strengthen French-speaking applicants' future employment opportunities.

Preferred Language of Instruction

French colleges were the primary pathway for French-speaking applicants. Seventy-six percent of 2024 AES respondents preferred a French college over an English college.³⁶ Application trends also reflect a preference for French colleges: Between 2019 and 2023, 70% of French-speaking applicants applied to only French colleges — a pattern that remained stable over time (see Table 1).

³³ We describe the demands and benefits of English-French bilingualism, not French-language fluency exclusively, because nearly all French-speaking Ontarians also speak English. In 2021, 1.56 million Ontarians (11% of the provincial population) could conduct a conversation in French (Auclair et al., 2023). 1.52 million (98%) could also do so in English (Auclair et al., 2023).

³⁴ Employment and Social Development Canada (2024) analyzed online job postings across Canada in official language minority communities outside of Quebec to learn about bilingualism requirements.

³⁵ In Ottawa – Gatineau (CMA), the average wages, salaries and commissions were higher for people who spoke English and French (\$61,600) compared to English only (\$58,500) (Statistics Canada, 2022). Ottawa – Gatineau (CMA) was taken as an example because the largest concentration of French-speaking Ontarians is in Eastern Ontario (Ministry of Francophone Affairs, 2024a).

³⁶ Note that for this finding, n=381 because this survey question had a 78% response rate.



Table 1*French-speaking Applicants' Application Patterns by College Language, 2019–2023*

College Language	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
Only applied to French colleges						
<i>Applicants</i>	3,536	3,667	3,358	3,372	3,691	
<i>Percentage</i>	69.2%	69.8%	71.7%	70.3%	66.5%	69.5%
Only applied to English colleges						
<i>Applicants</i>	958	899	774	897	1,204	
<i>Percentage</i>	18.7%	17.1%	16.5%	18.7%	21.7%	18.6%
Applied to both French colleges and English colleges						
<i>Applicants</i>	619	685	553	525	654	
<i>Percentage</i>	12.1%	13.0%	11.8%	11.0%	11.8%	11.9%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	5,113	5,251	4,685	4,794	5,549	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=25,392. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.

Additionally, over three-quarters of French-speaking applicants selected a French college as their first choice between 2019 and 2023 (see Table 2).



Table 2*French-speaking Applicants' First Choice College Language (Applied), 2019–2023*

First Choice College Language	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
French College						
<i>Applicants</i>	3,884	4,073	3,674	3,666	4,057	
<i>Percentage</i>	76.1%	77.5%	78.4%	76.4%	73.3%	76.4%
English College						
<i>Applicants</i>	1,218	1,181	1,010	1,132	1,477	
<i>Percentage</i>	23.9%	22.5%	21.6%	23.6%	26.7%	23.6%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	5,102	5,254	4,684	4,798	5,534	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=25,372. This table displays the first-rank choices by college language among French-speaking applicants. The administrative file includes a binary “stage” variable, which includes “A” and “C”—meaning “applied” and “confirmed.” This table includes a summary of “applied” first-rank choices only. Applicants who did not have clear first choices were dropped. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.

Between 2021 and 2023, this pattern increased by 10%. Confirmation trends from the 2019 to 2023 period also demonstrate that French colleges were the more popular choice. In this period, about 78% of French-speaking applicants confirmed at French colleges,³⁷ mainly in BHASE programs (86%³⁸) (See Table 3).³⁹

³⁷ See Appendix, Table 7. This is a five-year average from the 2019 to 2023 period.

³⁸ See Appendix, Table 8. This is a five-year average from the 2019 to 2023 period.

³⁹ On average, 14% of French-speaking applicants confirmed in STEM programs at French colleges between 2019 and 2023 (See Appendix, Table 8). See Appendix, Table 9 for the top five STEM programs at French colleges.



Table 3

French-speaking Applicants' Top Five Confirmed BHASE Programs at French Colleges, 2019–2023

BHASE Program	Number of French-speaking Applicants who Confirmed
Early childhood education diploma	1,164
Social service worker diploma	1,000
Police foundations diploma	866
Personal support worker certificate	556
Pre-health sciences pathway to certificates and diplomas (certificate)	432

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=4,018. Between 2019 and 2023, 11,807 French-speaking applicants confirmed in BHASE programs at French colleges overall. 4,018 of 11,807 (34%) were in the top five BHASE programs displayed in the table above.

Between 2019 and 2023, application patterns show an increased interest in English colleges among French-speaking applicants. Nearly a fifth of French-speaking applicants applied to only English colleges between 2019 and 2023 (see Table 1). This trend increased by 56% between 2021 and 2023.⁴⁰ In the same period, the number of French-speaking applicants who selected an English college as their first choice increased by 46% (see Table 2).

On average, 22% of French-speaking applicants confirmed at English colleges between 2019 and 2023.⁴¹ This finding matches the national trend in 2022-23: In Canada, excluding Quebec, 22% of postsecondary graduates who attended French-language elementary and secondary schools attended English-only PSE (Statistics Canada, 2025a).⁴² Confirmation patterns among French-speaking applicants in the 2019 to 2023 period reveal the rising popularity of English colleges. Between 2021 and 2023, the number of French-speaking applicants who confirmed at English colleges increased by

⁴⁰ Note that the overall number of French-speaking applicants also increased (18%) between 2021 and 2023.

⁴¹ See Appendix, Table 7.

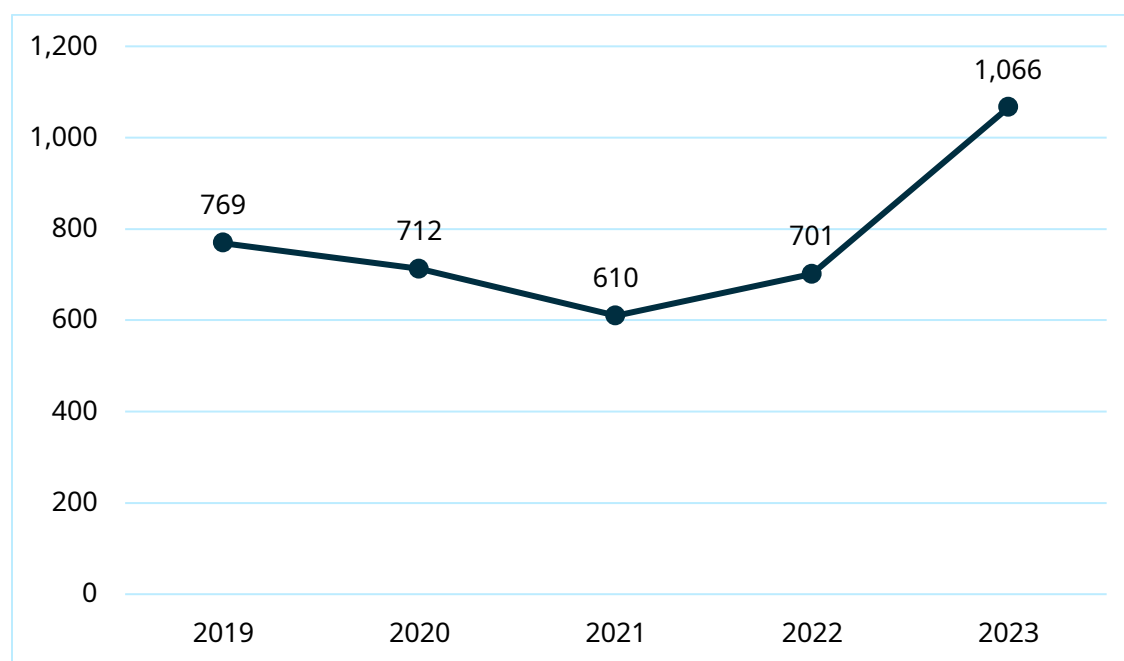
⁴² Statistics Canada's (2025a) findings came from the 2021 Census of Population and 2022-23 survey data from the Postsecondary Student Information System, an annual national survey that collects information on enrolments and graduates of publicly assisted postsecondary institutions in Canada.



75% (See Figure 2).⁴³ Between 2019 and 2023, French-speaking applicants who confirmed at English colleges primarily selected BHASE programs (84%⁴⁴) (See Table 4).⁴⁵ The majority confirmed in general arts and science programs.

Figure 2

French-speaking Applicants Who Confirmed at English Colleges, 2019–2023



Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Note: n=17,605. This figure displays the number of French-speaking applicants per year who confirmed at English colleges from 2019 to 2023.

⁴³ Note that the overall number of French-speaking applicants who submitted confirmations also increased (22%) between 2021 and 2023.

⁴⁴ See Appendix, Table 10. This is a five-year average from the 2019 to 2023 period.

⁴⁵ On average, 16% of French-speaking applicants confirmed in STEM programs at English colleges between 2019 and 2023 (See Appendix, Table 10). See Appendix, Table 11 for the top five STEM programs at English colleges.



Table 4
French-speaking Applicants' Top Five Confirmed BHASE Programs at English Colleges, 2019–2023

BHASE Program	Number of French-speaking Applicants Who Confirmed
General arts and science certificate	684
General arts and science diploma	454
Police foundations diploma	94
Practical nursing diploma	90
Business diploma	89

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data
Notes: n=1,411. Between 2019 and 2023, 3,238 French-speaking applicants confirmed in BHASE programs at English colleges overall. 1,411 of 3,238 (44%) were in the top five BHASE programs displayed in the table above.

Top Confirmed Programs and Labour Market Demand

2024 AES results reveal the importance of programming and employment prospects, and administrative data from 2019 to 2023 show that French-speaking applicants mainly confirmed in programs that align with in-demand sectors in Ontario (See Tables 3 and 4). These sectors also need more bilingual candidates. For example, the early childhood education diploma was the most frequently confirmed program at French colleges in this period. In Ontario, there is a predicted shortage of 8,500 early childhood educators (ECEs) by 2025-26 (Colleges Ontario, 2024). There is also a pronounced need for French-speaking ECEs (Kula, 2024; Migneault, 2024; Southcott, 2019). The Provincial Government has invested in increasing access to French-language and bilingual early years and childcare programs (Government of Ontario, 2021; Ministry of Education, 2024d).

Additionally, programs in social services and law, including social service work and police foundations, are among the top five confirmed programs at both French and English colleges. Mental health and social service practitioners are in great demand in Ontario, particularly after the pandemic (Counter et al., 2024). Between 2022 and 2031,



nearly 60,000 new job openings are expected in social and community service worker occupations across Canada (Counter et al., 2024). In addition to this general demand, occupations in law and social assistance industries frequently require bilingualism in English and French (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2024; Southcott, 2019).

In Ontario, there are also significant shortages in healthcare professionals, such as nurses and personal support workers (PSWs) (Baumann & Crea-Arsenio, 2023; Jones, 2024). The added need for French speakers in these professions compounds these shortages. Between 2006 and 2021, the proportion of French-speaking healthcare workers in Ontario decreased by 4% (Statistics Canada, 2025b).⁴⁶ In this context, the Federal and Provincial governments have co-invested in the training of French-speaking PSWs and child and youth mental health practitioners in Ontario (Ministry of Francophone Affairs, 2024b). In the 2019 to 2023 period, healthcare programs, including practical nursing and personal support work, were among the top five confirmed programs at both French and English colleges. French-speaking applicants are equipped to use their healthcare training and language skills to provide care for patients in both English and French. Previous Canadian studies have found that language concordance between patients and healthcare providers make for healthier patients (de Moissac & Bowen, 2019; Seale et al., 2022).

In Ontario, there are many jobs to fill in education, social service and healthcare sectors. These are public-facing service roles that involve daily interaction, which are enhanced with bilingual communication skills. French-speaking applicants are a potential talent pipeline for provincial labour market needs, and they will play an important role in supporting the well being of Ontarians.

French-speaking applicants who confirmed at French and English colleges in the 2019 to 2023 period showed a preference for workforce preparation in sought-after fields. Regardless of the language of instruction of their college studies, French-speaking applicants' training and bilingualism will be assets to the Ontario labour market upon graduation. Future research could explore the relationship between college language of instruction and labour market preparedness. For example, there could be added practical value in learning occupation-specific nomenclature. Learning the vocabulary

⁴⁶ Statistics Canada's (2025b) study examined healthcare workers in Canada and the use of official languages at work using the Census of Population from 2021 and previous years.



needed for effective communication in particular sectors could be advantageous for French-speaking applicants in their future workplaces. Further exploration could also pursue the perception of French and English college credentials among graduates and employers. For example, research could explore French-speaking college graduates' access to and success in bilingual positions, and whether there is a difference between those who attended French or English colleges.

Conclusion

Our research identified who French-speaking applicants are, what factors influenced their college choices and which colleges and programs they chose. This population is slightly older, on average, and there is a clear French school board to French college pathway. A key finding of this study and HEQCO's 2025 study of French-speaking students at English and bilingual postsecondary institutions is the importance of programs. In both studies, French-speaking applicants and students were most concerned with program offerings. Currently, Ontario colleges are engaged in critical programming decisions. In this context, our findings provide insight into the programs that French-speaking applicants value most, which could be helpful to government and Ontario colleges.

In the process of understanding French-speaking applicant identities and college choices, we found a relationship to labour market demands. Our findings revealed French-speaking applicants' high uptake in programs that correspond with in-demand labour market areas. Ontario colleges prepare graduates who fill labour market gaps, and this population will bring the asset of bilingualism to Ontario's workforce.

To best support French-speaking learners in college and as they enter their careers, more data is needed. Future research could broaden its focus to international applicants and students. How do their demographic profiles, motivations and pathways differ from the domestic population? Future research could also investigate the growing interest in English college programming among French-speaking applicants. Exploring the next steps of French-speaking applicants who confirmed in general arts and sciences programs at English colleges would also be beneficial. An exploration of the complete educational journeys of French-speaking learners from the time of application to their entrance into the workforce would provide greater foundational knowledge about this population. An analysis of regional trends would also offer important context: Are the



factors and trends in pathways similar or different across the province? And are applicants moving to attend college, or staying close to home? These future exploratory avenues should be pursued with attention to the role of social and cultural influences. Our findings and proposed future research directions could be applied by Ontario colleges, researchers and government to ensure a thriving college system for French-speaking learners in Ontario.



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Appendix

French-speaking Ontario College Applicants' Preferences and Pathways

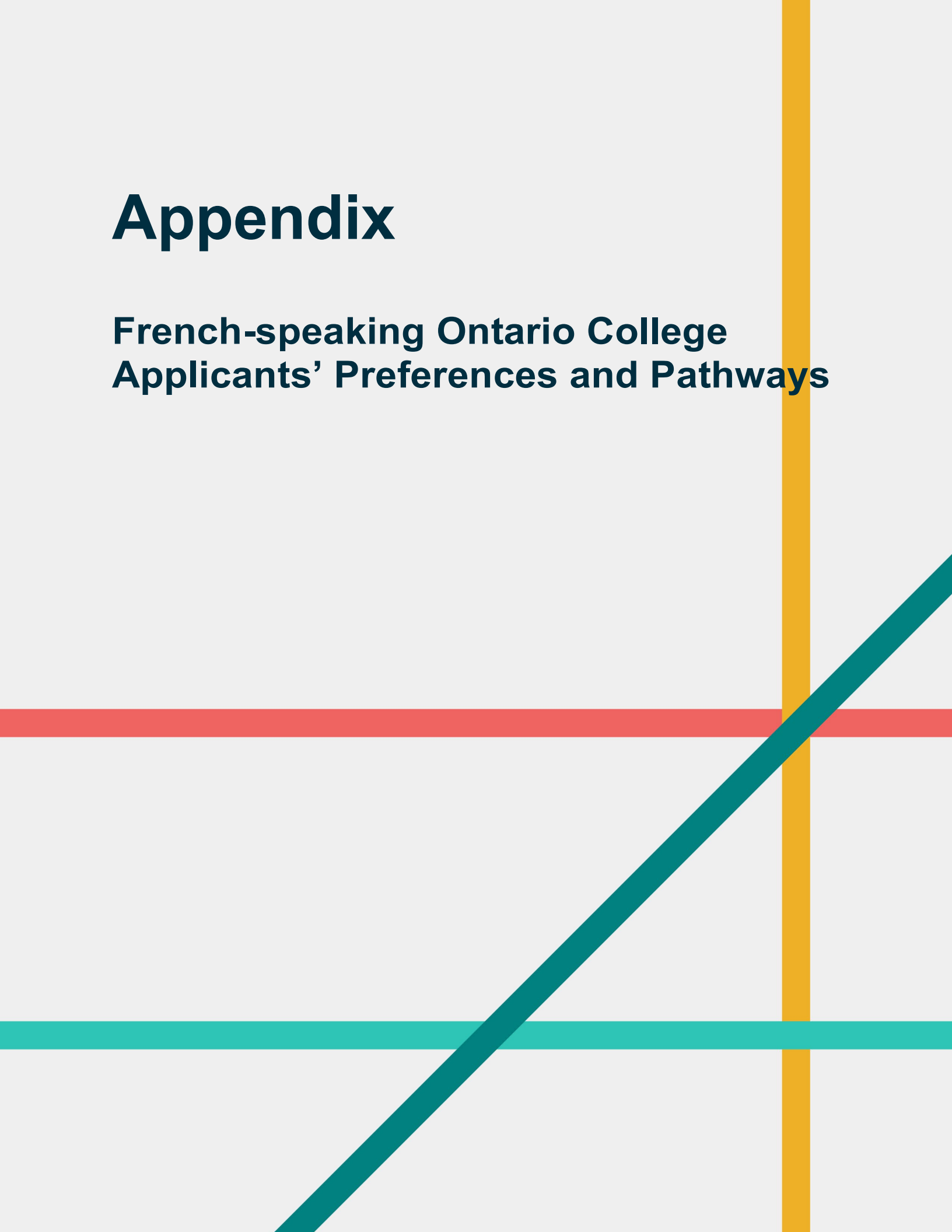


Table A1

Ontario Elementary and High School enrolments in English School Boards and French School Boards, 2019–2024

School Board	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024	5-Year Average
English School Board						
<i>Enrolments</i>	2,055,985	2,025,355	2,029,010	2,054,645	2,080,600	
<i>Percentage</i>	94.8%	94.7%	94.8%	94.8%	94.9%	94.8%
French School Board						
<i>Enrolments</i>	113,510	113,095	112,005	111,995	112,570	
<i>Percentage</i>	5.2%	5.3%	5.2%	5.2%	5.1%	5.2%
Total, English School Boards and French School Boards						
<i>Enrolments</i>	2,169,495	2,138,450	2,141,015	2,166,640	2,193,170	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Ontario Data Catalogue (2024a)

Notes: Enrolment counts include public and Catholic school boards. Enrolment numbers for the 2023-2024 academic year were preliminary as of September 20, 2024. English school board enrolments include overall enrolments, not FSL enrolments exclusively. Cell sizes less than 10 were counted as 10. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.



Table A2

Ontario Elementary and High School Enrolments in French as a Second Language Programs at English School Boards, 2019–2024

French as a Second Language Program	2019–2020	2020–2021	2021–2022	2022–2023	2023–2024	5-Year Average
Core French						
<i>Enrolments</i>	744,805	742,280	750,945	741,415	779,815	
<i>Percentage</i>	72.3%	72.4%	72.9%	72.9%	73.8%	72.9%
French immersion						
<i>Enrolments</i>	252,700	251,405	250,580	249,425	251,595	
<i>Percentage</i>	24.5%	24.5%	24.3%	24.5%	23.8%	24.3%
Extended French						
<i>Enrolments</i>	32,020	31,580	27,960	25,775	25,395	
<i>Percentage</i>	3.1%	3.1%	2.7%	2.5%	2.4%	2.8%
Total, French as a Second Language Programs						
<i>Enrolments</i>	1,029,525	1,025,265	1,029,485	1,016,615	1,056,805	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Ontario Data Catalogue (2024b)

Notes: Enrolment counts include both public and Catholic school boards. Enrolment numbers for the 2023-2024 academic year were preliminary as of September 20, 2024. Cell sizes less than 10 were counted as 10. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.



Table A3
French-speaking Applicants by Gender, 2019–2023

Gender	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
Female, Other						
<i>Applicants</i>	2,804	2,962	2,672	2,731	3,148	
<i>Percentage</i>	54.8%	56.4%	57.0%	57.0%	56.7%	56.4%
Male						
<i>Applicants</i>	2,309	2,289	2,013	2,063	2,401	
<i>Percentage</i>	45.2%	43.6%	43.0%	43.0%	43.3%	43.6%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	5,113	5,251	4,685	4,794	5,549	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=25,392. The “other” gender category includes applicants who did not report their gender or reported a non-binary gender. This group was combined with the “female” gender category due to small cell sizes to prevent accidental disclosure. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.



Table A4*French-speaking Applicants by Age Group, 2019–2023*

Age Group	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
0–19						
<i>Applicants</i>	1,834	1,788	1,569	1,345	1,354	
<i>Percentage</i>	35.9%	34.1%	33.5%	28.1%	24.4%	31.2%
20–24						
<i>Applicants</i>	1,305	1,254	1,184	1,167	1,181	
<i>Percentage</i>	25.5%	23.9%	25.3%	24.3%	21.3%	24.1%
25–34						
<i>Applicants</i>	830	962	819	963	1,377	
<i>Percentage</i>	16.2%	18.3%	17.5%	20.1%	24.8%	19.4%
35+						
<i>Applicants</i>	1,144	1,247	1,113	1,319	1,637	
<i>Percentage</i>	22.4%	23.7%	23.8%	27.5%	29.5%	25.4%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	5,113	5,251	4,685	4,794	5,549	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=25,392. The five-year average proportions for each category are included. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



Table A5*French-speaking Female and Gender-Diverse Applicants by Age Group, 2019–2023*

Age Group	Gender	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
	Female, Other						
0–19	<i>Applicants</i>	926	863	819	698	681	
	<i>Percentage</i>	33.0%	29.1%	30.7%	25.6%	21.6%	28.0%
	Female, Other						
20–24	<i>Applicants</i>	670	697	621	638	621	
	<i>Percentage</i>	23.9%	23.5%	23.2%	23.4%	19.7%	22.8%
	Female, Other						
25–34	<i>Applicants</i>	498	607	505	590	868	
	<i>Percentage</i>	17.8%	20.5%	18.9%	21.6%	27.6%	21.3%
	Female, Other						
35+	<i>Applicants</i>	710	795	727	805	978	
	<i>Percentage</i>	25.3%	26.8%	27.2%	29.5%	31.1%	28.0%
Total							
	<i>Applicants</i>	2,804	2,962	2,672	2,731	3,148	
	<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=14,317. This table displays the combined yearly totals of French-speaking applicants by age group and the combined “female and “other” gender categories for the years 2019 to 2023 inclusive. The “other” gender category includes applicants who did not report their gender or reported a non-binary gender. This group was combined with the “female” gender category due to small cell sizes to prevent accidental disclosure. The five-year average proportions for each category are included. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



Table A6*French-speaking Male Applicants by Age Group, 2019–2023*

Age Group	Gender	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
	Male						
0–19	<i>Applicants</i>	908	925	750	647	673	
	<i>Percentage</i>	39.3%	40.4%	37.3%	31.4%	28.0%	35.3%
	Male						
20–24	<i>Applicants</i>	635	557	563	529	560	
	<i>Percentage</i>	27.5%	24.3%	28.0%	25.6%	23.3%	25.8%
	Male						
25–34	<i>Applicants</i>	332	355	314	373	509	
	<i>Percentage</i>	14.4%	15.5%	15.6%	18.1%	21.2%	17.0%
	Male						
35+	<i>Applicants</i>	434	452	386	514	659	
	<i>Percentage</i>	18.8%	19.7%	19.2%	24.9%	27.4%	22.0%
Total							
	<i>Applicants</i>	2,309	2,289	2,013	2,063	2,401	
	<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=11,075. This table displays the combined yearly totals of French-speaking applicants by age group and the “male” gender category for the years 2019 to 2023 inclusive. The five-year average proportions for each category are included. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



Table A7*French-speaking Applicants' Confirmations by College Language, 2019–2023*

College Language	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
French college						
<i>Applicants</i>	2,934	2,920	2,527	2,614	2,752	
<i>Percentage</i>	79.2%	80.4%	80.6%	78.9%	72.1%	78.2%
English college						
<i>Applicants</i>	769	712	610	701	1,066	
<i>Percentage</i>	20.8%	19.6%	19.4%	21.1%	27.9%	21.8%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	3,703	3,632	3,137	3,315	3,818	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=17,605. The combined yearly totals of overall confirmations among French-speaking applicants from 2019 to 2023 is 17,605. Overall, 69% of French-speaking applicants between 2019 and 2023 submitted confirmations. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.



Table A8*French-speaking Applicants' Confirmed Field of Study at French Colleges, 2019–2023*

Field of Study	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
BHASE						
<i>Applicants</i>	2,528	2,517	2,184	2,224	2,354	
<i>Percentage</i>	86.2%	86.2%	86.4%	85.1%	85.5%	85.9%
STEM						
<i>Applicants</i>	406	403	343	390	398	
<i>Percentage</i>	13.8%	13.8%	13.6%	14.9%	14.5%	14.1%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	2,934	2,920	2,527	2,614	2,752	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=13,747. The five-year average proportions for each category are included.

Table A9*French-speaking Applicants' Top Five Confirmed STEM Programs at French Colleges, 2019–2023*

STEM Program	Number of French-speaking Applicants who confirmed
Computer systems technician diploma	342
Computer programming diploma	322
Electrical engineering technician diploma	212
Computer engineering technology advanced diploma	180
Animation diploma	157

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=1,213. Between 2019 and 2023, 1,940 French-speaking applicants confirmed in STEM programs at French colleges overall. 1,213 of 1,940 (63%) were in the top five STEM programs displayed in the table above.



Table A10*French-speaking Applicants' Confirmed Field of Study at English Colleges, 2019–2023*

Field of Study	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	5-Year Average
BHASE						
<i>Applicants</i>	630	584	510	579	935	
<i>Percentage</i>	81.9%	82.0%	83.6%	82.6%	87.7%	83.6%
STEM						
<i>Applicants</i>	137	128	100	120	128	
<i>Percentage</i>	17.8%	18.0%	16.4%	17.1%	12.0%	16.3%
Unspecified						
<i>Applicants</i>	2	0	0	2	3	
<i>Percentage</i>	0.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.3%	0.2%
Total						
<i>Applicants</i>	769	712	610	701	1,066	
<i>Percentage</i>	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=3,858. Some applications did not include MCU codes and field of study coding was not possible. In these cases, the field of study was coded as “unspecified.” The five-year average proportions for each category are included. Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.



Table A11

French-speaking Applicants' Top Five Confirmed STEM Programs at English Colleges, 2019–2023

STEM Program	Number of French-speaking Applicants who confirmed
Computer programming diploma	69
Computer engineering technology advanced diploma	56
Electrical engineering technician diploma	55
Computer systems technician diploma	54
Electrical engineering technology advanced diploma	26

Source: OCAS 2019–2023 administrative data

Notes: n=260. Between 2019 and 2023, 613 French-speaking applicants confirmed in STEM programs at English colleges overall. 260 of 613 (42%) were in the top five STEM programs displayed in the table above.

