



Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario

An Overview of Francophone Postsecondary Education Participation in Ontario

@ Issue Paper No. 17
November 26, 2013

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Published by

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

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Cite this publication in the following format:

Arnold, H., Motte, A., & DeClou, L. (2013). *An Overview of Francophone Postsecondary Education Participation in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.



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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	7
Introduction.....	8
Who is Identified as Francophone in Ontario?	9
Francophones in Ontario.....	10
French Schools in Ontario.....	12
Educational Attainment of Ontario Francophones and Fields of Study	14
Participation in Postsecondary Education.....	16
Persistence in Postsecondary Education.....	18
Conclusion.....	20
References.....	22

List of Figures

Figure 1: Proportion of Population by Age Groups – Ontario, 2006	10
Figure 2: Percentage of Francophones Reporting French Language Spoken at Home, 2001 and 2006	10
Figure 3: Population Reporting French by Selected Language Characteristics	11
Figure 4: Endogamous and Exogamous Francophone Families with Children	11
Figure 5: Proportion of Population Reporting French or French and English by Selected Language Characteristics	13
Figure 6: Highest Level of Education – Ages 25 to 64 Years	13
Figure 7: Field of Study for the Francophone Community with at least a Bachelor’s Degree	14
Figure 8: Educational Aspirations by Language and Residence	15
Figure 9: Registrations in College and University Directly from Secondary School by Students from French and English Language District School Boards (%)	16
Figure 10: Graduating Students from French-Language School Boards (by Region of Origin) and their PSE Destination (by Language of Study)	16
Figure 11: Institutional Graduation Rate	19

Introduction

Francophone students represent a unique population within Ontario, and understanding their educational experience is an important factor for developing policies and programs that contribute to their development, both as individual learners and with respect to the linguistic, cultural and economic vitality of the broader francophone community. Over the past few decades, postsecondary education (PSE) has increasingly become a focal point for all Canadians, with research linking length of schooling and levels of education to engagement in the workplace, career stability, occupational status, wealth, stronger social ties, and better psychological and physical health (Pallas, 2000). More recently, federal and provincial governments have linked the strength of the Canadian economy to the expansion of postsecondary enrolment (Industry Canada, 2001; Rae, 2005).

While there are many important issues relevant to the postsecondary experiences of Francophones in Ontario and to their participation in PSE expansion, the analysis in this paper focuses on two of them. The first is equity: are Francophones in Ontario participating in PSE at the same rate as their anglophone counterparts? Given the strong relationship between education and economic prosperity, making sure that francophone youth have equal access to PSE is important. The second issue is linked to the broader issue of linguistic vitality: if francophone communities are to be strong, there must exist opportunities for French to be spoken at home, at work and in the community more generally. In the context of this paper, we explore whether the postsecondary system allows for the pursuit of studies in French and whether francophone students are choosing such pathways.

Ontario has recognized the unique needs and challenges of the francophone community through the development of an education system that seeks to address its language needs. The *Aménagement Linguistique Policy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005) provides a framework that aims to identify the challenges faced by the francophone community, with a specific focus on how French-language schools and school boards create teaching and learning conditions that optimize the transmission of French language and culture from one generation to the next. In 2011, the Ontario government followed this report with a policy paper aimed at French-language postsecondary education and training in Ontario (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU), 2011). The policy paper outlines two key objectives: the sustainability of the francophone culture and of labour market opportunities for Ontarians (MTCU, 2011).

In addition to the key objectives, the *Politique D'Aménagement Linguistique* identifies significant challenges relating to the delivery of programs and supports for francophone learners. They identify the most significant as:

1. a migration of Francophones to the English-language postsecondary education and training system that is largely due to the limited availability of French-language programs in some fields of study;
2. the need for more teaching resources to enable francophone students to learn and thrive in French;
3. difficulty maintaining a linguistic balance as the demand for English services and staff increases;
4. difficulty promoting and enhancing a pluralistic francophone milieu at the postsecondary level, where English predominates;
5. a low rate of enrolment in French-language postsecondary education institutions by graduates of French-language high schools;
6. lack of a common definition of a francophone student, and lack of consistency in administrative practices, leading to difficulties in analyzing and interpreting data on the francophone student population;
7. a widely dispersed francophone population, more than one-third of which is located in central and southwestern regions of Ontario where French-language educational and training opportunities are limited (MTCU, 2011, p. 13).

In addition to identifying significant challenges, this Ministry document includes recommendations on the expansion of opportunities for Francophones to continue their studies in French and thus enhance their economic opportunities. While the Fellowships for Studying in French Program has been cancelled, the Ontario government announced a new bursary for francophone students to support those who travel more than 80 kilometers to attend full-time studies in French in Ontario¹ (Ontario Office of the Premier, 2013).

The purpose of this paper is to summarize data on the participation and persistence levels of Francophones at the postsecondary level in Ontario. This summary will address access, attainment and persistence, whenever relevant data are available. Another area of study too broad for this paper is the issue of who is included in the francophone population. This paper will not attempt to disentangle the various methods of inclusion and exclusion but will comment on some of the consequences of these different methods.

Who is Identified as Francophone in Ontario?

The definition of who is counted as francophone in any given study is affected by historical context, the data available for study and the researchers' own perceptions of how to define the population. In their report, Forgues, Landry and Boudreau (2009) detail the strengths and weaknesses of using different census variables to define the francophone population. For example, defining Ontario Francophones by their mother tongue² (532,855 using the 2006 Census) may underestimate the number of people who use French on a regular basis and may therefore not take into consideration the larger population which could undertake studies in French. This definition would exclude immigrants to Ontario whose first spoken language was neither English nor French but who now speak and primarily use French. Similarly, the census variable "knowledge of official languages" probably overestimates the number of Francophones (1,426,540 using the 2006 Census). This definition relies on individuals' self-perception of their language ability, and respondents who indicate knowledge of the French language do not necessarily use French regularly or identify with the francophone community.

The challenge facing researchers and policy makers is to capture the population that both speaks French and identifies with the francophone community. Currently the Government of Ontario uses a combination of survey responses to arrive at a population that is inclusive of both those whose mother tongue is French and those whose mother tongue is neither English nor French but who speak French most often at home. Additionally, it includes those with French as a mother tongue who still understand French even if they cannot conduct a conversation. Using 2006 Census data, this broader definition increases the population of interest from 4.4% (mother tongue) to 4.8% (Forgues, Landry & Boudreau, 2009), while recognizing that being francophone is not only about language: there is a cultural component that remains even if fluency is lost.

Francophones in Ontario

Using the Government of Ontario's most recent method of identification, there were 611,500 Francophones in Ontario according to the 2011 Census. They represent about 5% of the overall population in the province and make up the largest francophone community outside of Quebec. Recent immigration has played an important role in ensuring the vitality of the community: about 10% of the Ontario francophone population is made up of ethnic minorities.

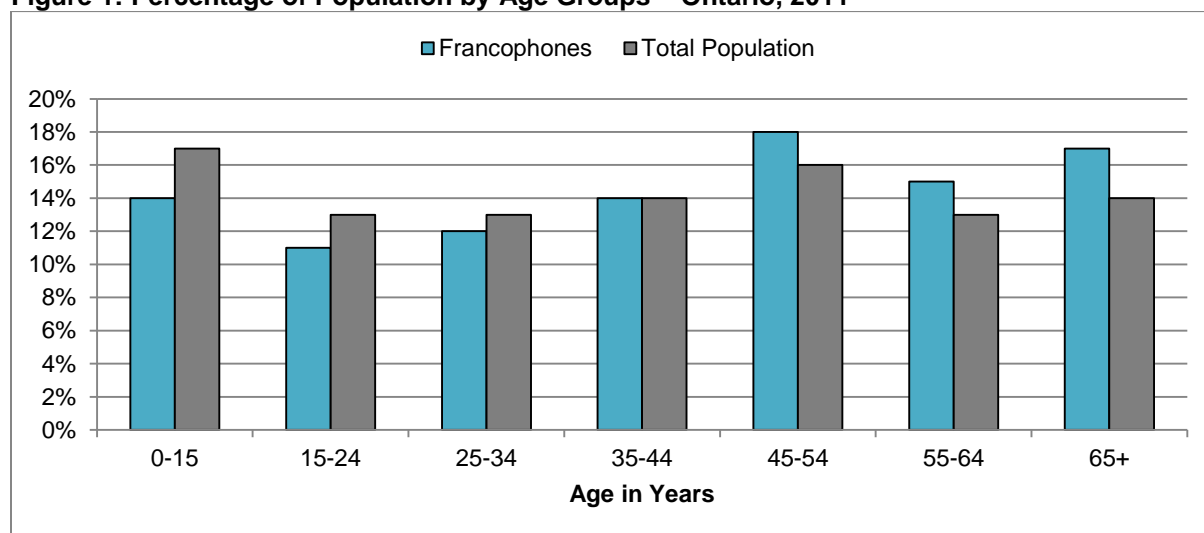
¹ Students must also be eligible for OSAP to qualify for this grant.

² Refers to the first language learned at home in childhood and still understood by the individual.

In terms of the geographic distribution of the population, 42.2% live in eastern Ontario, 30% live in central Ontario, 20.8% live in northeastern Ontario, 5.7% live in southwestern Ontario, and 1.2% live in northwestern Ontario (Office of Francophone Affairs, 2013).

The francophone population in Ontario tends to be older than the general population. Figure 1 below indicates that the proportion of francophone youth in the three age groups capturing 0 to 34-year-olds is always below the proportion of the Ontario population in the same age groups. A smaller youth population is a serious source of concern for Official Language Minority Communities (OLMCs), as it means a smaller group of individuals to renew the workforce and maintain cultural vitality. It also has some important implications for the education system. While enrolment in French-language school boards continues to increase as a result of better access, in the long run, French institutions might find themselves competing with their English counterparts for clientele.

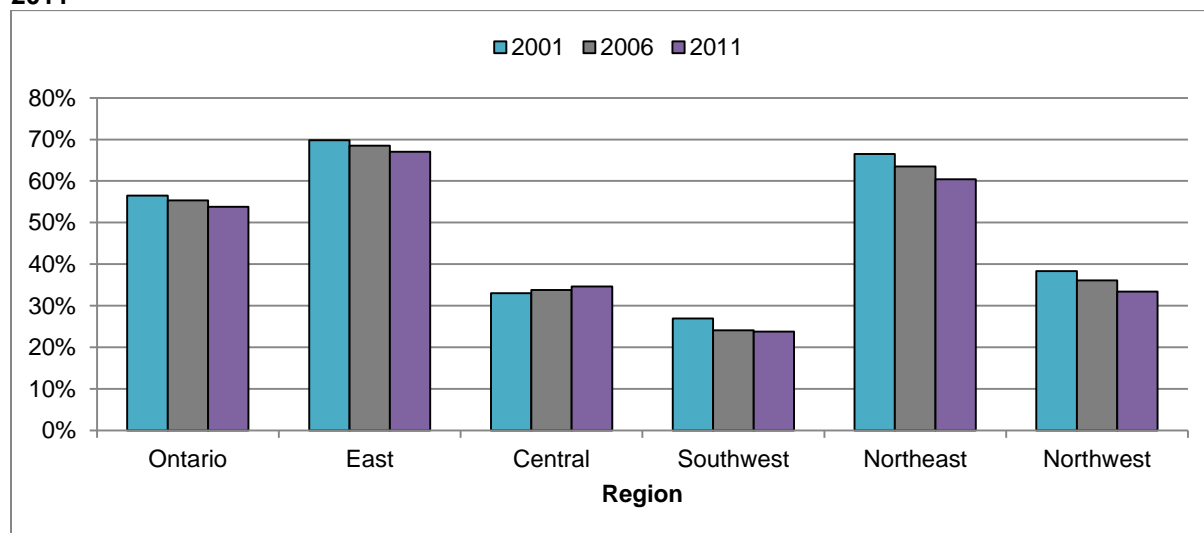
Figure 1: Percentage of Population by Age Groups – Ontario, 2011



Source: Office of Francophone affairs, based on Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population

Other data reinforce these concerns. According to the Office of Francophone Affairs, the proportion of Francophones who reported that the French language was spoken at home decreased between 2001, 2006 and 2011 in all Ontario regions except central Ontario, which reported slight increases over time (Figure 2).

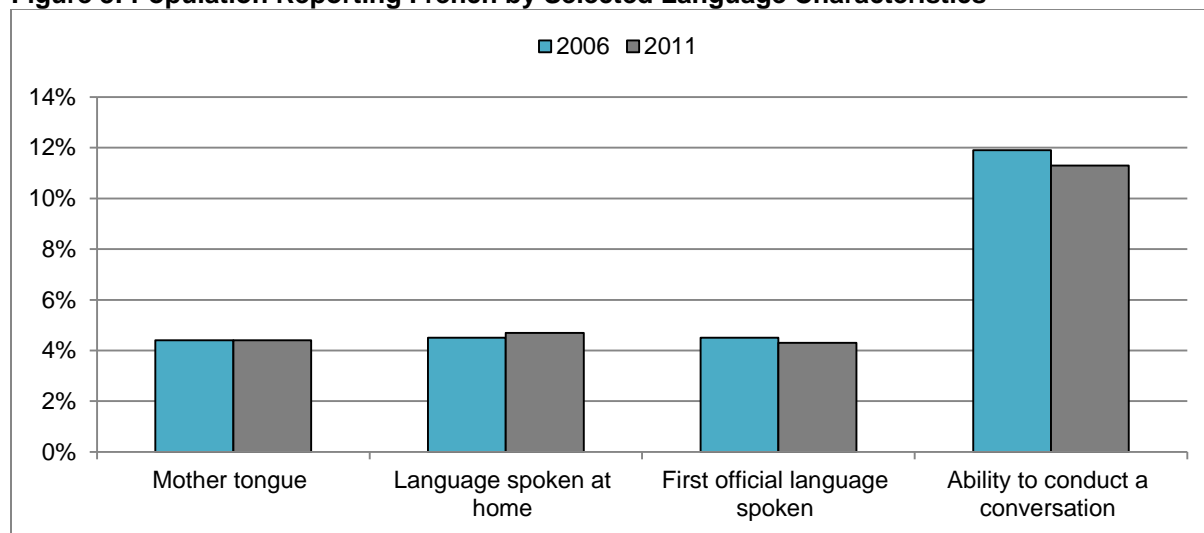
Figure 2: Percentage of Francophones Reporting French Language Spoken at Home, 2001, 2006 and 2011



Source: Office of Francophone affairs, based on Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population

Figure 3 below looks at the broad proportional changes in the Ontario population reported by selected French characteristics, and current data from the 2011 Census indicate that the number of people reporting French increased from 2006 to 2011 in all four categories. Despite these increases there was little change in proportions between 2006 and 2011, and the small changes observed depend on the specific language characteristic measured.³ Information detailing where this migration originated is not yet available.

Figure 3: Population Reporting French by Selected Language Characteristics

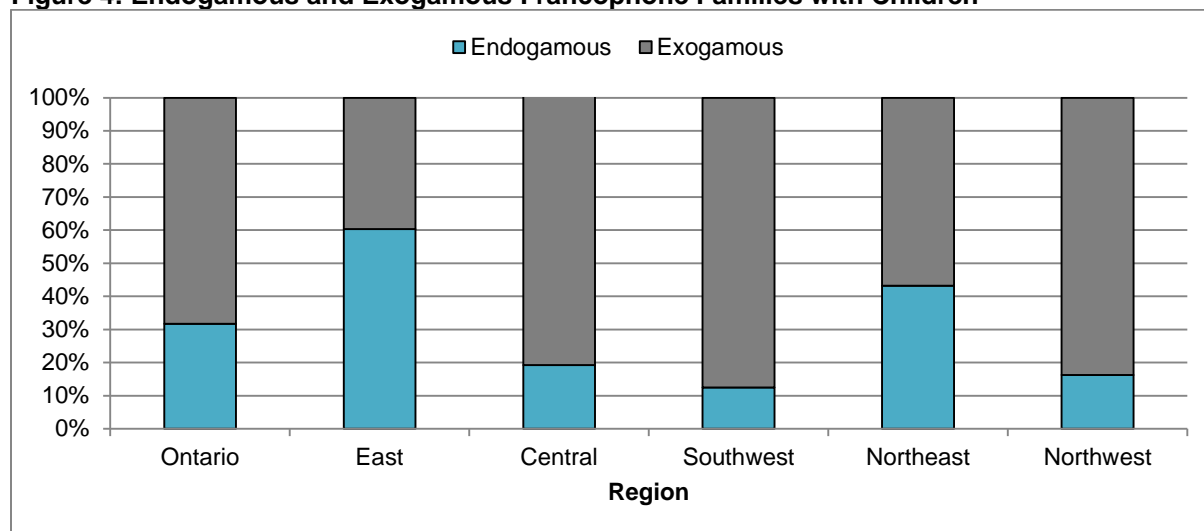


Source: Statistics Canada, Census in Brief 2011

³ Statistics Canada indicates that caution be used when comparing 2006 and 2011 data due to changes in the placement and context of language questions within the 2011 questionnaire. It suggests that the changes probably moderate the downward trend of French between 2006 and 2011, especially for the “mother tongue” and “language spoken at home” variables.

Another source of concern for the vitality of the French language in Ontario is that the great majority of francophone children are living in francophone families where only one of the parents speaks French (termed “exogamous families”). Research shows that francophone children living in exogamous families tend to assimilate into English more rapidly (O’Keefe, 2001).

Figure 4: Endogamous and Exogamous Francophone Families with Children



Source: Office of Francophone affairs, based on Statistics Canada, 2011 Census of Population

French-Language Education in Ontario

Providing education in the mother tongue of official linguistic minority groups in Canada is rooted in historic and legal provincial obligations. Educational rights are part of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, but the issue of whether this protection extends to PSE was never resolved, and this despite the provisions in the Official Languages Act of 1988 (modified in 2005).

There are currently four public French school boards in Ontario, governing approximately 130 elementary and secondary schools, and eight Catholic French school boards, governing approximately 301 elementary and secondary schools. Overall, from kindergarten to grade 12, there were close to 96,700 students enrolled in the French school boards compared with 1,946,400 students in English school boards in 2011-2012. Unlike the anglophone population in elementary and secondary schools, the count of the francophone population is more than maintaining itself increasing by 1,000 to 2,000 students each year since 2007 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

Despite the expectation that French secondary schooling would lead to increased postsecondary enrolment, Ontario was slow to develop French-language colleges and universities. The first French-only college, La Cité collégiale, opened in 1990 and, as expected, college enrolments rose in the following two years (Frenette & Quazi, 1999). It was followed by a second college, Collège Boréal, in 1995. Collège Boréal, now with seven campus locations, and La Cité collégiale, with four locations, both offer a fairly broad selection of programs run exclusively in French.

The situation is a bit different at the university level, with only one institution, the Collège de Hearst (a degree-granting institution), offering exclusively French programs. This small university, with three campus locations in northern Ontario, has undergraduate programs in the social sciences, psychology and business, but does not support graduate-level programming. There are also bilingual universities and affiliated or federated

institutions in Ontario, the largest being the University of Ottawa. These institutions offer varying degrees of French instruction, generally limited relative to English language offerings, with very limited programming at the graduate level.

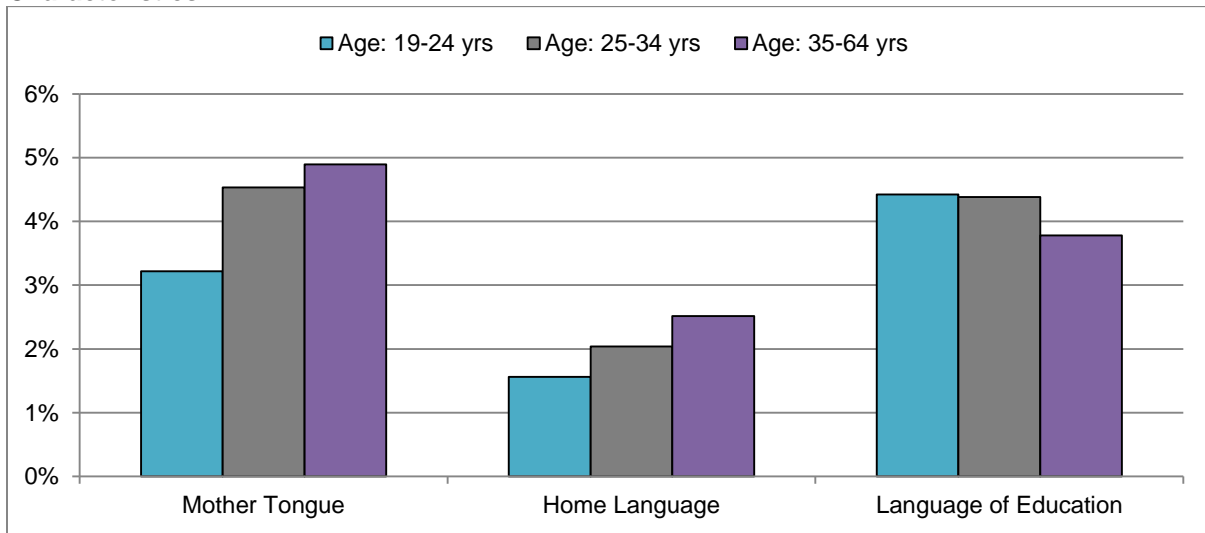
Over the past half-century, the opportunities available for French-language instruction in Ontario have increased dramatically. Despite these increases, there are still limitations with regard to the availability of programs, and the levels and locations of study associated with French-language postsecondary instruction. The MTCU have recently begun to address these limitations through the provision of \$16.5 million to help expand French-language programs and services in universities and colleges (MTCU News Release, 2013).

With the majority of bilingual institutions located in eastern or northern Ontario, Francophones wishing to continue their studies in French beyond the secondary level are restricted geographically. While there is one bilingual university campus and one French-language college located in Toronto, there are no bilingual universities or colleges in western Ontario. The Government of Ontario has started to attend to these geographical restrictions. It was recently announced that all francophone institutions are eligible for funding to deliver French-language programs in southwestern and central Ontario with a partner college or university located in those areas (MTCU News Release, 2013). Institutional logic would suggest that the supply of educational opportunities should be driven by demand and that the absence of demand in particular regions of Ontario can explain at least some of the restrictions in availability. However, Frenette and Quazi (1999) argue "...that in a minority context, it is the supply of educational services which creates the demand rather than the contrary" (p. 10). This lack of geographical representation in French-language studies at the postsecondary level may be the most significant restriction in choice for Ontario Francophones and a key concern for maintaining linguistic vitality within communities.

Figure 5 provides some support to Frenette and Quazi's (1999) argument. As opportunities to study in French have increased within Ontario, younger cohorts have chosen to study in French⁴ at a proportionally higher rate. This is despite them being less likely to report French as their mother tongue and less likely to use French at home. Choice of program, level of study and specific institution is highly individualized, with individual, family and community characteristics contributing to choice of school. These multiple factors may or may not directly relate to the choice of language, but by increasing the availability and diversity of French language opportunities, it is likely that more Francophones would choose to study in French.

⁴ "Language of Education" includes those who identify their studies at secondary and postsecondary as mostly French and as 50/50 French and English.

Figure 5: Percentage of Population Reporting French or French and English by Selected Language Characteristics

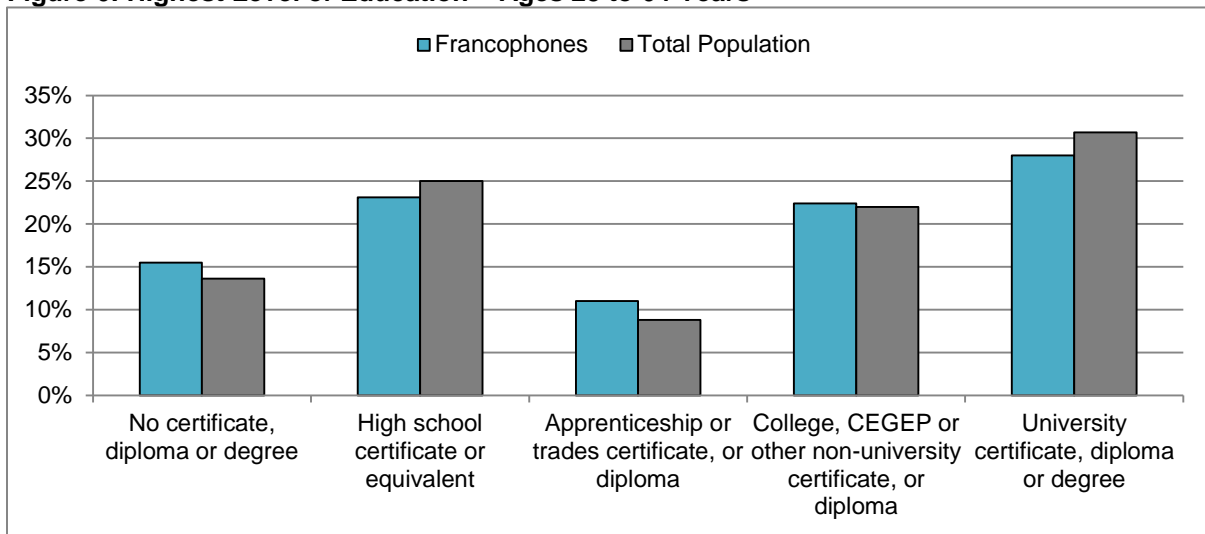


Source: Labour Force Survey (LFS), March 2012

Educational Attainment of Ontario Francophones and Fields of Study

According to the 2006 Census data, Francophones in Ontario tend to have slightly lower levels of education than the general population. Figure 6 indicates that, although slightly fewer Francophones have a high school degree or equivalent than the total population, slightly more have an apprenticeship certification, trades certificate or college diploma. Also, Francophones are less likely to have a university certificate, diploma or degree. One note of caution with regard to these data: with proportionally more Francophones in the over 40 age categories, these education data may not reflect the current attainment rates of Francophones.

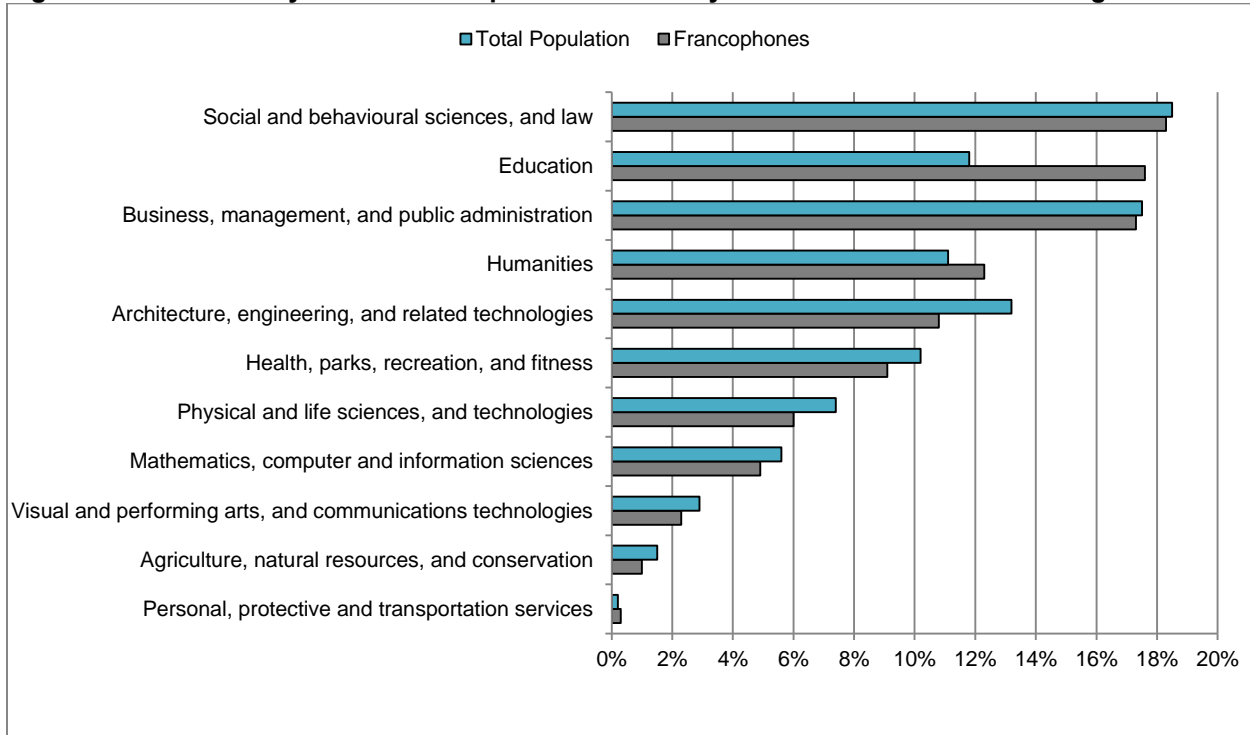
Figure 6: Highest Level of Education – Ages 25 to 64 Years



Source: Office of Francophone Affairs, Government of Ontario (2009), based on Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2006

Again using 2006 Census data, Figure 7 shows that francophone university graduates also differ in their fields of study compared to the total population. Education stands out as a field of study that attracts proportionally more Francophones, which Frenette and Quazi (1996) argue is due to the availability of education as a field of study in French and the availability of job opportunities in French.

Figure 7: Field of Study for the Francophone Community with at least a Bachelor's Degree

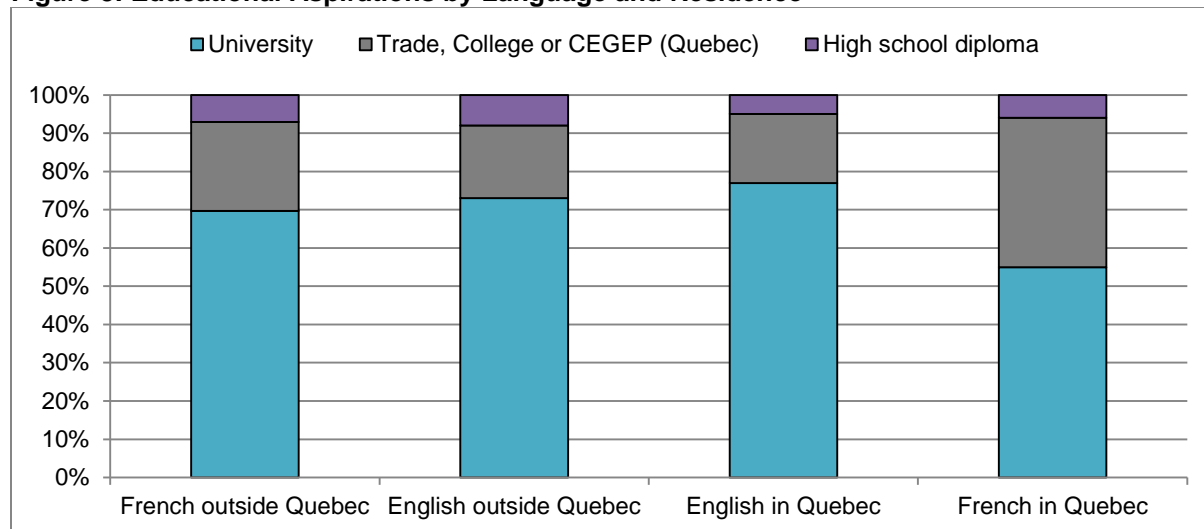


Source: Office of Francophone Affairs, Government of Ontario (2009), based on Statistics Canada, Census of Population 2006

Participation in Postsecondary Education

Young Canadians typically have high educational aspirations. The great majority of 15-year-olds aspire to attend college or university (Looker & Thiessen, 2004) (see figure 8). On that front, young Francophones are not different from their anglophone counterparts (Allard, Landry & Deveau, 2009). Using data from the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), Looker and Thiessen find that Francophones⁵ living outside of Quebec have educational aspiration patterns that are more similar to the anglophone population living outside of Quebec than to the Francophone population living in Quebec.

Figure 8: Educational Aspirations by Language and Residence



Source: Looker and Thiessen, 2004

Do high educational aspirations materialize into PSE participation? Early studies of Ontario Francophones' access rates (using mother tongue as the definition of a Francophone) showed great disparities in participation rates between Francophones and Anglophones. Up until the mid-1980s, participation rates for Francophones and Anglophones increased at the same rate, but after this time Francophones' rates began to rise faster and, by 1994, Francophones' participation rates were 71.1% of those of Anglophone (Frenette & Quazi, 1996⁶). This increase in participation rates was not unexpected, although perhaps a bit late in coming given the assumption that the creation of French-language secondary schools at the end of the 1960s would lead to an increase in postsecondary participation.

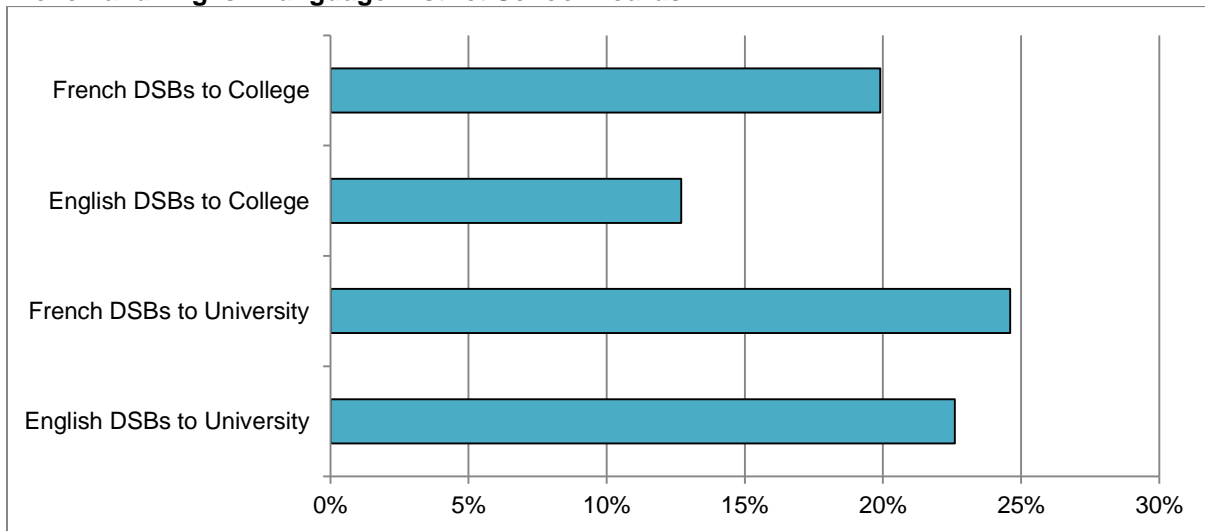
Recent administrative data bode well for Francophones with respect to PSE participation. In a thorough analysis of college and university application data, King et al. (2009) report that students from French-language district school boards were more likely to attend college (19.9% vs. 12.7%) and slightly more likely to attend university (24.6% vs. 22.6%) than students from English district school boards (Figure 9). While it is important to keep in mind that King et al.'s analysis looks at students attending French-language district school boards and not francophone students as defined by mother tongue or usage, the results remain positive for francophone communities. More generally, Finnie and Mueller (2008) echo these results for Canadian Francophones (identified by mother tongue) living outside Quebec. Using data from the Youth in

⁵ The YITS uses mother tongue to identify Francophones.

⁶ Additionally, Frenette and Quazi determined that the creation of La Cité collégiale had no adverse effect on university enrolments in the French community, despite the speculation that university participation had reached a ceiling and that this unilingual college would pull enrolment from the universities.

Transition Survey, they conclude that Francophones living outside Quebec, in the rest of Canada, are more likely to attend college than non-Francophones living outside of Quebec, in the rest of Canada. Finnie and Mueller also find that there are no statistically significant differences in university participation rates compared to the majority language group. Overall, linguistic minorities (French outside Quebec and English in Quebec) have somewhat higher overall PSE participation rates than the majority language groups overall.

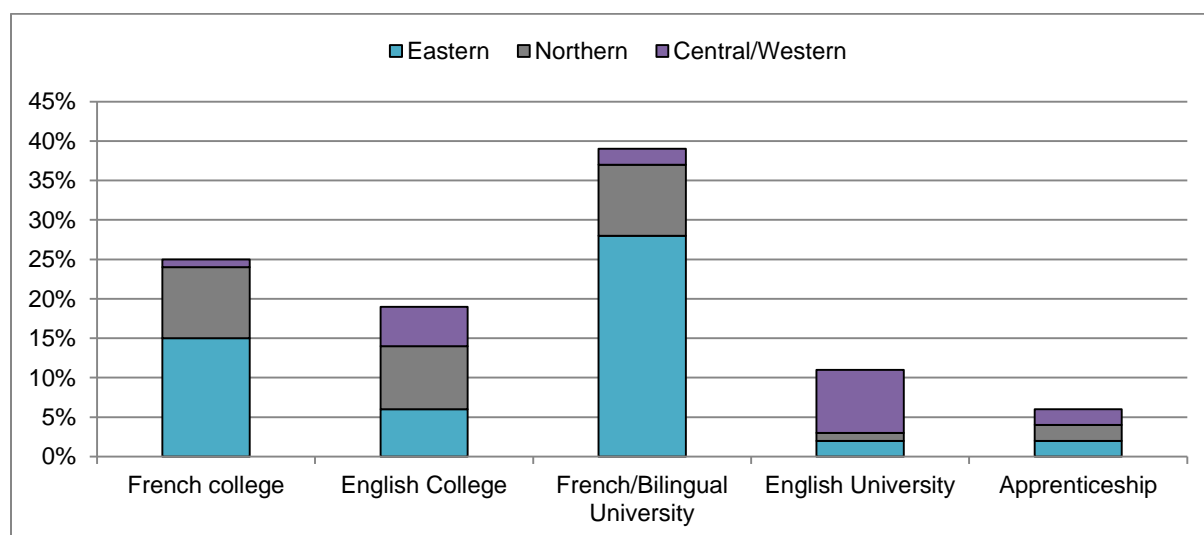
Figure 9: Registrations in College and University Directly from Secondary School by Students from French and English Language District School Boards



Source: King et al., 2009

These studies on postsecondary participation do not indicate language of instruction, and of particular importance to members of the francophone community is the opportunity to continue their studies in French at the postsecondary level. Data collected from school boards in 2003-2004 indicate that a significant proportion (29%) of secondary school graduates from French school boards who continue on to PSE choose English-language institutions (Figure 10). Although the data indicate that a large proportion choose a French/bilingual university, the data do not distinguish between languages of study. Francophone students may be attending a bilingual university and studying in English. Students from the western region of Ontario who wish to study at a regional or local college have no choice but to study in English. College students in general tend to favour local institutions and this may explain the large proportion of French secondary school graduates from the central/western region who choose English-language studies at the college level.

Figure 10: Graduating Students from French-Language School Boards (by Region of Origin) and their PSE Destination (by Language of Study)



Source: MTCU, 2008, p. 90

Postsecondary enrolment at the college level has increased across the province. Orpwood et al. (2012) studied this change by looking at the disproportionate expansion rates of specific minority groups and changes in math achievement. Their data tracked French-language PSE enrolment and English-language PSE enrolment of French-language students (defined as students from French-language school boards) from 2008 to 2010 and found an overall increase of 11.9% in French-language students' college enrolment. Although close to the provincial increase of 12.7%, a larger portion of this increase (16.2%) occurred in French-language colleges compared to English-language colleges (6.3%). Additionally, francophone students at French-language colleges achieve slightly higher math grades in their first year of PSE than francophone students at English-language colleges. Both groups of students maintained their level of math achievement throughout the three-year enrolment increase.

While we know relatively little about the specific obstacles that Francophones face in accessing PSE and even less about what influences their choice of language of study, Allard et al. (2009) find four barriers to pursuing PSE in French. The most significant is poor academic performance in French class, followed by proximity of French-language postsecondary institutions, preference for English education and limited funding for PSE in French. Researchers typically use the language variable as an explanatory variable rather than as the subject of the study itself (i.e., French-language is entered in the regression, rather than having a study on Francophones). We have even less information when we want to look specifically at Ontario students.

While the recent increase in PSE participation rates extends to the francophone population, francophone students may still face obstacles that their Anglophone peers do not. A study by Labrie, Lamoureux and Wilson (2009) contains up-to-date information on young Ontarians' PSE access rates. Using administrative data, the authors conclude that distance is a key factor in the decision to pursue PSE in French. When francophone students move more than 150 km from home, it will be to study in English and to study at a university. The authors hypothesize that this willingness to move for English-language study is linked to the reputation of specific institutions and the programs offered in these institutions.

Persistence in Postsecondary Education

Focusing on access, participation and enrolment is only one side of the PSE discussion. Another important

line of questioning asks to what extent Francophone students who gain access to PSE institutions are actually graduating. The issue of persistence among francophone Ontarians can be approached in a variety of ways. At the individual level, we can ask how the graduation rates of francophone students compare to their anglophone peers. In addition, how do program, institution and college-university transfer rates compare between the two groups? The movement of students between institutions, particularly with credit transfer, is considered one method of improving access to PSE (Heath, 2012). Another level of analysis involves comparing institutional data. Do the graduation rates of French-language institutions differ from those of English-language institutions? Existing research allows us to comment on some of these issues, but the data are often embedded in research that focuses primarily on the majority, non-francophone population.

Research that surveys graduation rates of college and/or university students seldom focuses specifically on the experience of francophone students. More general studies of graduation rates sometimes include language as a control variable, giving us an indication of how some French-language students fare. Using Academics' PSE outcomes study from 2009-2010, Sattler (2010) found no association between self-identifying French as a first language and being identified as a school leaver or a graduate at the college level. Similarly Dooley, Payne and Robb (2011) report no significant relationship between language (identified as mother tongue) and university departure rates and graduation rates.

Other data show small differences between francophone students and the anglophone majority. Finnie, Childs and Qiu (2012) report that, although both university and college francophone students are more likely than anglophone students to switch to another program or institution, francophone college students are slightly more likely to graduate, and francophone university students are slightly less likely to graduate than the anglophone majority. This research utilized the Youth in Transition Survey (YITS), in which mother tongue is used as the method of francophone identification. Of the three studies above that report on the effects of language, none distinguish between francophone students studying in English and those studying in French. Consequently, although these studies give some indication that first language or mother tongue French is not associated with PSE disadvantage in terms of persistence, they do not tell us how francophone students studying in French are faring relative to francophone students studying in English or how members of either group alone are persisting in their PSE studies relative to the anglophone student population.

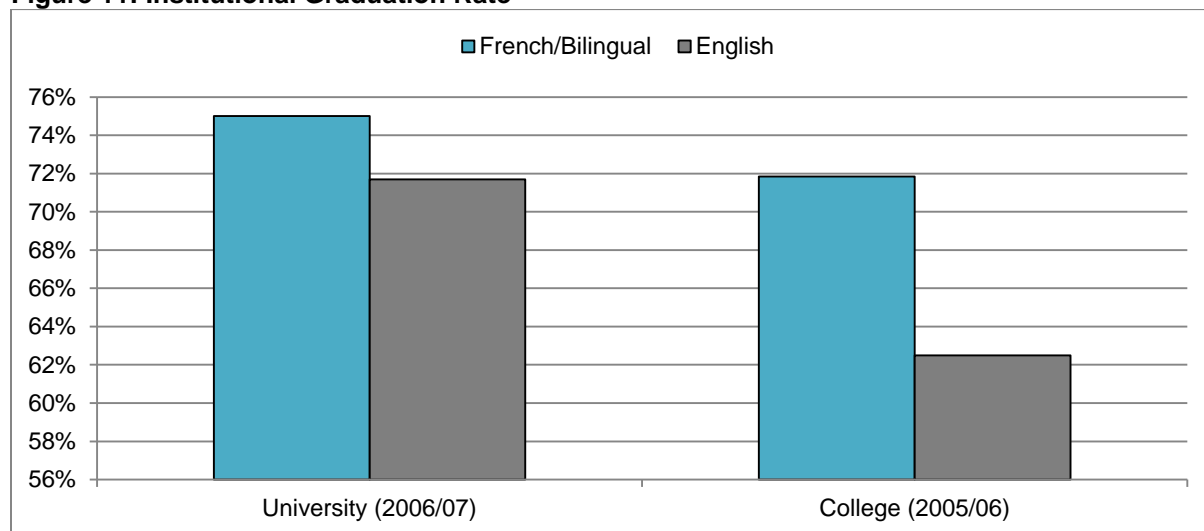
Another way of looking at the persistence of francophone students is through an analysis of French-language postsecondary colleges' and French/bilingual universities' transfer rates. Decock et al.'s (2011) study of colleges in Ontario reports that La Cité collégiale, a French-language college in Ottawa, has the highest proportion of its graduates transferring to university when compared to the rest of the community colleges in Ontario. This college also has the highest proportion of graduates enrolling in universities outside Ontario, and the authors surmise that a likely destination for these students is Quebec. Intra-province transfers from La Cité collégiale are largely to the University of Ottawa (U of O), and Heath (2012) reports that students from La Cité collégiale represent 23% of the U of O's transfer population. Transfers from colleges to universities are associated with proximity, with universities tending to attract college graduates from their vicinity. Transfer students tend to further their studies in areas that are related to previous studies (Decock et al., 2011), and the proximity to U of O gives students at this particular French-language college the opportunity to pursue further studies at a large, local and bilingual university.

Student mobility through intra-provincial transfer improves access to PSE, but francophone students studying at French-language colleges may face significant obstacles if they choose to move from college to university. They may not have local access to French-language studies. They may be unable to find French-language programs in their area of study. They may be limited in their transfer credits if they consider transitioning to English-language studies. Despite the high transfer rate of students from La Cité, this may not represent the experience of francophone students in other regions of Ontario.

Academic persistence can also be measured broadly by comparing the graduation rates of French-language and English-language institutions. At the university level, French-language programs are primarily contained within bilingual institutions. Data that compare French and English institutions at the university level

necessarily combine exclusively French institutions with those that are bilingual. Figure 11 illustrates the gap in graduation rates between French/English and English-only universities, and the slightly greater gap in graduation rates at the college level.

Figure 11: Institutional Graduation Rate



Source: MTCU, 2008, pp. 111, 113

Supporting these reported differences at the college level is a study using the colleges' key performance indicators. These data indicate that the graduation rate in college programs is positively associated with the percentage of francophone students (self-identified as first language) (Zhao & McCloy, 2009).

These measures of persistence indicate that, overall, French-language institutions compare well with English-language institutions and that francophone students are doing well when compared to their anglophone peers. But there are equally important questions that cannot be addressed without additional research that focuses more specifically on the francophone experience: what factors influence francophone students when choosing between French- and English-language postsecondary institutions? What factors influence their persistence in French or their decision to switch to English? Do the graduation rates of Francophones differ based on their language of study?

Conclusion

In summary, it appears that, given the existing data, francophone students in Ontario are accessing and graduating from postsecondary institutions at a rate that is comparable to their anglophone peers. However, the francophone student community is made up of a number of diverse groups, making this a simplistic conclusion. The existing data tend to exclude groups of Francophones or fail to examine sub-groupings within the total Francophone population, such as students who attend French-language secondary school, those who are bilingual, those living in exogamous families and those who live within vibrant francophone communities. Given the data gaps that exist, it is not possible to know whether our findings reflect the current status of all francophone groups' postsecondary participation in Ontario.

Of significant concern to members of the francophone community is the availability of French-language programming at the postsecondary level. Their concern is valid given the lack of opportunity in some regions within Ontario. Allard et al. (2009) reflect this concern in their study, noting that a significant portion of grade twelve students in French-language secondary schools choose to continue in English at the postsecondary

level, particularly in the applied and health sciences. Additionally, the authors argue that postsecondary French-language institutions not only provide programming for Francophones; they also contribute to the cultural, economic and linguistic vitality of the communities in which they are embedded.

There is a need for better data and more research that focuses directly on the experience of francophone students. This would lead to an understanding of what factors influence their language choice and how they perceive their language choice influencing their participation in their linguistic community. Any additional research also needs to be circulated and disseminated widely, enabling the development of a broader and deeper body of knowledge and leading to a more holistic understanding of the needs of francophone students.

This paper has touched on a few of the demographic changes in Ontario's francophone population and has generally found that, despite a slight decrease in French-language use at home and in the identification of French as mother tongue, younger cohorts are increasingly attending PSE, French-language colleges are performing well and attending a French-language school for secondary-level study is positively linked to PSE achievement.

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