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**Title** Building confidence in students' HE & FE choices: impact of a two-day immersive university experience  
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**Research Domain: Access and widening participation (AWP)**

**Building confidence in students' HE & FE choices: impact of a two-day immersive university experience**

**Goal:** The student experience and the transition experience of francophone students in a minority context (outside the province of Quebec) is a relatively new research domain for Higher Education scholars in Canada. This study focuses on the impact of specific resources available to grade 12 students in Ontario's French first-language secondary school, as well as the influence of the particular sociolinguistic context in which they live, on the process of transition to further and higher education (FE/HE), from their own perspective. Our case study focuses on the experiences of students who participated in a provincially funded two-day immersive experience at the University of Ottawa, in May 2015, and seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do students describe the process of selecting their FE/HE institution and the language of instruction (French or English) of their program (factors affecting choice, information sources)?
2. What impact do they attribute to their participation in the two-day immersive experience on the process of selecting both their FE/HE institution and the language of instruction of their program?

Our paper present highlights of this study and their importance for key stakeholders, namely secondary schools, the Ministry of Education, and the FE/HE institutions in general, and the University of Ottawa in particular.

**Theoretical framework**

Most Canadian studies on access to FE/HE for Francophone students in a minority contexts have focused on secondary students' ambitions and intentions of pursuing their postsecondary studies in French (Allard et al., 2008; Laflamme & Dennie, 1990). Samson (2014) documented students' experience of transition from a counselling and career development perspective. Author A's (2007) study was the first in Canada to bring to light

the transition experience to FE/HE of Francophone secondary students in a French language minority context. This ethnographic study of student voice raised important questions as to the support and resources offered to secondary school students to make informed, confident decisions as to their FE/HE future. This study demonstrated that for students, the transition actually begins while still in secondary school. According to Author A et al., (2009), from 1998 to 2006, more than 60 % of graduates of French first-language secondary students in Central Southwestern Ontario chose to enroll in an English medium-of-instruction university, and 85% of them enrolled at English medium-of-instruction colleges. The decision to continue FE/HE in English can be explained by a lack of French language options, or conversely, an overabundance of English language options. In short, existing research reveals little of the processes lived by students transitioning from a French language secondary school, or of the resources and needs of these students during the process of selecting a FE/HE institution, their program and language of instruction.

### **Methodology:**

This qualitative study centered on student voice and experience during the transition to FE/HE adopts a multiple case study methodology (Collerette, 2009; Karsenti & Demers, 2011; Roy, 2009; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2009). Participants include 61 grade 12 students from six secondary schools (three in Eastern Ontario, three in Southwestern Ontario), who attended the two-day immersive experience at the University of Ottawa in May 2015, as grade 11 students. Each of the six secondary schools represents a case, which was analyzed in detail, then compared with the others, in order to add to the depth and rigor of our study. Our data collection privileged an open discussion group format (Liamputtong, 2011; Morgan, 2002), for a deep understanding of the meaning and interpretations participants evoked of their transition. Our research had 2 distinct data collection moments, capturing different phases of the transition process: 1) before the provincial application deadline (January 12), and 2) after the submission deadline. Discussions were recorded, transcribed and analyzed, using a combination of general inductive analysis (Blais & Martineau, 2006) and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2010).

### **Findings:**

A vast majority of participants feel that the immersion experience was essential in helping them confirm or infirm their choice of postsecondary program and institution type (university or college). They stress the importance of a

lived authentic experience in a university context, with their colleagues as well as students from other secondary schools, and university students. However, other than the interactive nature of the workshops and activities, they cannot identify one specific component of the experience that influences a specific part of the selection and transition processes they live in grade 12, other than to make them more confident in their choice of FE or HE. Analysis reveals that the Fall is characterized by the stress of making a « bad choice » of FE/HE institution or program. This stress or tension, continues until the submission deadline in January, after which students are torn between making a “bad choice” of program or choosing an institution that may not issue an offer of admission. Once the submission deadline has passed, their stress shifts to financial concerns and the fear of not being admitted.

**Importance of this study:** Through its conceptual and methodological underpinning’s, this study affords a deeper understanding of the complexity of the processes of choice of FE/HE institution and of language of instruction by grade 12 students in six different French first-language school boards across Ontario. Results allow for the emergence of local and regional contextual elements, while providing a framework for larger discussions and exchange of best practices to better support all students in their transition to FE/HE, starting with choice of program, institution and language of instruction. Furthermore, this study underscores the impact of participating in an Anticipation Camp, such as that organized by the University of Ottawa in May 2015, on the processes of choice for PSE, from the perspective of the participants: the students. The findings will allow for improvements to future anticipation camps as regards programing and as regards the overall experience on campus, which allows students to project themselves into their future selves as FE/HE students, and as concerns this particular setting, as members of a vibrant francophone community. Hence, our contribution to knowledge building around the question of choosing a FE/HE institution is important, notably as regards our focus on student voice, on linguistic minority students, on the transition to PSE and the collaboration between secondary schools and the FE/HE sector.

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