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Introduction from Guest Editor

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In Montréal in December 2009, the Québec Inter-university Centre for Social Statistics (QICSS) and the Canadian Millennium Scholarship Foundation co-organised an international conference on higher education and social statistics. The specific theme was Using Social Statistics to Illuminate the Issues, Processes, and Outcomes in Higher Education: International Viewpoints. The conference attracted over 120 participants from Africa, Europe, and North America (Canada and the United States). The participants belonged to a variety of institutions, such as ministerial bodies, statistical organisations, NGOs, and universities.

The aim of the conference was to take stock of what we know at present, and what remains to be learned, concerning the major trends that we face regarding higher education. More specifically the conference looked at the emerging issues, and whether researchers and policy makers are properly equipped, in terms of social statistics data and methodologies, to keep pace with these trends. Moreover, the conference analysed the contribution of the most recent surveys on students, and specifically longitudinal surveys. Finally, the conference considered to what extent industrialized countries and developing nations share similar concerns and whether the "performance" of the various systems should be compared, and if so, how.

Special emphasis at the conference was put on looking at access to higher education, financial issues, and the links between higher education and the labour market. These topics were considered across the social sciences: education, sociology, economics, demography. In order to address these issues, the conference covered the following eight sub-themes:

1. Access to post-secondary education;
2. Comparative studies on access;
3. Studies, migration, and immigration;
4. Strategic student pathways;
5. Impact on financial aid policies;
6. Access to post-secondary education and financial issues;
7. School-to-work transitions;
8. Economic benefits.

This special issue includes a selection of five articles that were presented at the conference. The articles illustrate the first two sub-themes of the conference, (access to higher education), as well as the third sub-theme on immigration and the last two sub-

themes on school-to-work transitions and economic benefits. Given the interest of the readership of the Canadian Journal of Higher Education, the first fours papers cover the Canadian context to highlight current issues in higher education Canada. We must add, though, that these issues are also relevant in other industrialised countries. Indeed, we include a fifth article that takes a comparative view from Europe. The articles cover a variety of groups than are all part of the higher education population today: youths, immigrants, non-traditional students, and older students. As we will see in the five articles, each group has its own specific issues, but many issues affect all groups.

Across the five articles, there are two themes. The first theme looks at participation in higher education of non-traditional students. These students can be the first of their family to enter higher education (so-called "first-generation" students) and/or older students (who are for example, over 25 or even older). This theme raises the question whether access to higher education, study conditions, and academic success are similar for non-traditional students compared to more traditional students (children of highly educated parents and/or students of typical university-going age). Indeed, is there equity in terms of access and outcomes?

The first article, by Kamanzi et al, uses the Canadian Youth In Transitions Survey (YITS) to show that first-generation students (i.e. students of parents without higher education), access less higher education in Canada, particularly the university sector. This said, there is no difference in terms of completing a degree. These results appear to be similar in Canada and the United States, although in the US, first-generation students continue to have lower completion rates as well. This raises the question of to what extent the Canadian system is more democratic than the American one.

In the case of older students, using the comparative Eurostudent data across Europe, the second article, by Orr, underlines large differences in the age profile of students between European countries. France, Czech Republic, and Slovakia have a young profile: Sweden and Finland an older one. Moreover, we see that age is also associated with working during studies and with studying part-time, both more frequent for older students. This is particularly the case in countries such as Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Estonia. What are the consequences of these study conditions in term of academic success? We can wonder what affect this has on the whether or not older students are successful?

Looking outside Europe, the article also points out that the United States appears to share a demographic profile of students with only a few European countries (the United Kingdom and Slovakia). It would be interesting to compare these figures with Canadian data; however there is almost no readily available data on the age of students across Canada (or within provinces). Publications, for example by provincial ministries, the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), Statistics Canada, or international publications (OCDE, UNESCO), do not systematically present such data. Without these data in a Canadian context, it is difficult to know whether or not there has been a rise in the number of non-traditional students in Canada. It is important that this population be documented correctly, if educational policies are to be implemented.

The second theme deals with how individuals, be it, for example, youths or immigrants, anticipate their future professional careers through higher education. Higher education can be seen as a means to an end. The last three articles analyse the efficiency of enrolling in higher education: specifically, is the investment of money and preparation worthwhile in terms of one's children's and one's own future employment prospects?

In the third article, Frenette, also using the YITS, documents to what extent youths in secondary school know which jobs require a university degree. Those who do know are more likely to enrol in university. Moreover, the earlier students acquire this knowledge, the higher the probability of enrolling. This raises the question of whether children are receiving the same career information either from school or at home. What role can careers advisers in secondary schools play to improve youths' access to information concerning the educational requirements of possible careers?

The fourth article, by Sweet, Anisef &Walters, uses the 2002 Canadian Survey of Approaches to Educational Planning (SAEP) to illustrate that despite generally possessing less wealth (income and assets) immigrant families save more for post-secondary education. This cannot be explained purely by differences in level of education but rather by aspirations and non-financial investment in their children's school careers (involvement in homework, parent/child interaction, and extracurricular activities). Immigrant families thus mobilize a range of parenting and investment strategies in order that their children can study in post-secondary education. To what extent do non-immigrant families have the same strategies? Should these latter strategies be more encouraged? Is there a risk of over-investment?

In the final fifth article, Girard draws on the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada (LSIC) to inform us that immigrant parents themselves, particularly those who already have foreign degrees, choose to study in post-secondary institutions in Canada. This said, they frequently study in a field different than that of the foreign degree. Can this be in part due to lack of recognition of foreign credentials? Moreover, there appears to be no immediate return (i.e. during the first four years in Canada), in terms of earnings, on this new investment in education once in Canada. More information is necessary to determine whether this a short-term observation or if it points to long-term difficulties for immigrants in finding qualified employment, even with Canadian qualifications.