

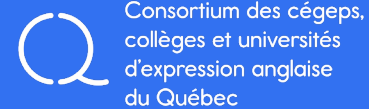


Forum for Youth Insights:  
Career and Education Orientations  
for the Post-COVID-19 World

**Report:**  
**Key Insights and Takeaways**

Organized by the Inter-Level Educational Table, a committee of the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network, in collaboration with Youth 4 Youth Quebec, the Black Community Resource Centre, and the Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC), and held online October 25, 2020.

Report writer : Eric Cohen for QUESCREN



**Report writer:** Eric Cohen

**Report coordination:** Anna Hunt, QUESCREN

**Report revision:** Anna Hunt, Lorraine O'Donnell, Patrick Donovan, QUESCREN

**Layout:** Bingo Bango

**Linguistic revision:** Linda Arui

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## **This forum report was produced for the Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network (QUESCREN).**

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QUESCREN is a collaborative network of researchers, stakeholders, and educational and other institutions that improves understanding of Quebec's English-speaking communities and promotes their vitality. It is housed at the School of Community and Public Affairs at Concordia University in Montreal.

QUESCREN acknowledges that we work and organize on unceded Indigenous lands. The Kanien'kehá:ka Nation is recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters of Tiohtià:ke/Montréal, where Concordia University is located. Tiohtià:ke/Montréal is historically known as a gathering place for many First Nations, and today it is home to a diverse population of Indigenous and other peoples. We respect the continued connections with the past, present, and future in our ongoing relationships with Indigenous and other peoples within the Montreal community.

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# ABOUT THE FORUM

**The kids are (mostly) alright!** That message was made loud and clear during a fascinating discussion when a group of passionate thinkers, educators, students, and speakers got together virtually on October 25, 2020, for **Concordia University's Forum for Youth Insights**. An initiative of the **Quebec English-Speaking Communities Research Network** through its **Inter-Level Educational Table**, in collaboration with **Youth 4 Youth Québec** and the **Black Community Resource Centre**, this year's forum had a special theme: Career and Education Orientations for the Post-COVID-19 World. In a nutshell, it was an opportunity for students to understand the new realities of the post-COVID-19 experience and how to navigate the sometimes confusing road ahead. Spoiler alert: We're gonna be alright (but we need to recalibrate slightly).

# OPENING SESSION

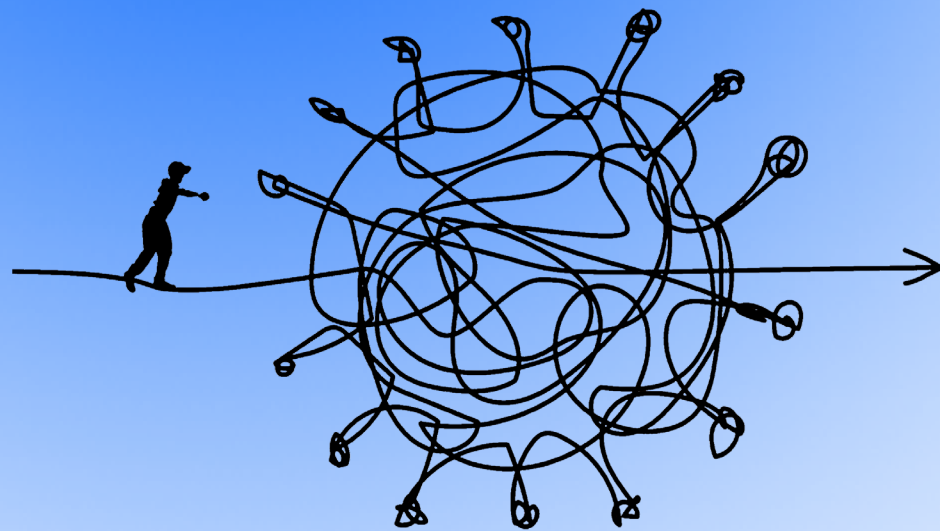
The forum began with a keynote from Concordia's Dr. **Natasha Blanchet-Cohen**, associate professor in the Department of Applied Human Sciences, whose research centers on community youth development with a focus on rights-based approaches to programs and services, culture, and eco-citizenship, particularly as they relate to immigrant and Indigenous young people. Dr. Blanchet-Cohen paid tribute to the past, present, and future by acknowledging that she was speaking from the territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation, who

are recognized as the custodians of the lands and waters on which we gather, even if that gathering is virtual. She then said that things are evolving rapidly, but that the pandemic is actually an opportunity for students to shape a new reality in a meaningful way. Dr. Blanchet-Cohen said she gained understanding of what it means to be part of collective change through involvement with an anti-apartheid student group in her youth. She feels this pandemic is another opportunity for young people to grow and be bold and forth-

**“this pandemic is another opportunity for young people to grow and be bold and forthcoming in unique ways”**

coming in unique ways, allowing them to respond to the changing realities with fresh ideas. She said that young people are often dismissed as naive, and told to “wait their turn” when it comes to making meaningful change. For instance, because of COVID-19, young people are being asked to sacrifice their in-person activities, which are so important for their own well-being, for the good of our society’s senior citizens. Dr. Blanchet-Cohen went on to say that the media has also portrayed the younger generation unfairly as of late, laying blame on them and

their perceived callousness for the spread of the virus. All this may create the impression among youth that their right to participate in society takes second place, even though they have equal rights. She said her research and teaching were dedicated to ensuring that older generations and institutions provide space and resources for youth to fully realize their potential.



The ∅ Canada Project

Dr. Blanchet-Cohen shared an image from the ∅ Canada Project of a person entering a circle with squiggly and chaotic coronavirus-shaped lines. These lines represent what the future feels like for many students—but the image also shows that there is an arrow out of the maze, a direction we are all moving towards. So the question is : How are we going to come out the other end together and stronger ?

Dr. Blanchet-Cohen feels we can make it out in good shape, and she explained this using three main concepts that apply to the next generation of students entering the workforce :

- Resiliency (we are wired to recover)
- Being part of changing the narrative of fear and gravitating to social justice (youth are at the forefront of that)
- Being strength-based

She said the uncertainty and massive social change brought on by the pandemic put students at an advantage, since they are already actualizing a more inclusive, multicultural society, where education emphasizes critical thinking and a more robust global understanding. Social media will be a valuable tool for youth to move forward in a healthy way. The legacy of COVID-19 is the realization that we need each other, and young people are now in the driver's seat because of their mastery of social networks. She concluded by encouraging students to continue to be creative and to think outside the box.



**“Uncertainty can be positive if we have the right toolkit and resources, and that’s worth noting for youth who are not only the future, but also the present.”**

Next up was **Madeleine Lawler**, President of Youth 4 Youth Quebec, who greeted her fellow students by saying “if you are here, it’s because you not only have dreams and aspirations, but because you also understand the hard work and dedication needed to make meaningful and substantial change.” She explained how COVID-19 affected her own personal journey from the realm of higher learning to the workforce (in a similar way to most people she knew in similar positions): a complete derailment! She joked about finding herself among the first graduating class from Zoom University, and highlighted the anxiety and uncertainty she and her generation feel about the precarious nature of employment in these trying times, especially for English-speaking youth in Quebec. Ms. Lawler did, however, explain that COVID-19 also provides a policy window for young people to shape the future, and that there will be a place at the table for her and her generation for discussions

about the future after the crisis has passed. That’s good news. Uncertainty can be positive if we have the right toolkit and resources, and that’s worth noting for youth who are not only the future, but also the present.

The opening session wrapped up with **Dr. Graham Carr**, President of Concordia University. He echoed the sentiments shared earlier, and went further to explain how Concordia is gaining knowledge, as a learning institution, on how to be a better digital learning institution as a result of COVID-19. He said that the pandemic has shown us that learning is a permanent exercise, and that education is a lifelong process. He pointed out that young Quebecers who are part of the digital generation have ambitions for their own future, but also for our collective social future, and universities are there to help find and define those pathways forward.

# EXPERT SESSIONS

Following the opening session, forum participants were invited to join the expert sessions. These were workshops centered on the following industries : the Arts, Health, Technology, and Vocational Training. The sessions provided an opportunity for participants to hear insights from industry experts in each of the fields, and for participants and experts alike to share their personal experiences. While the discussions in each workshop varied, the following questions were used as a guide :

- What are the barriers for this industry ?
- How is COVID-19 impacting this industry ?
- Is there anything particular about this industry in Quebec ?
- What are some barriers to succeeding in this industry,
- and proposed solutions/actions to overcome barriers ?
- How can educational institutions in Quebec help prepare students for careers in this industry ?

# ARTS EXPERT SESSION

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## THEME:

The arts are a very particular industry with a unique set of challenges. COVID-19 has made it that much more challenging, but there is hope.

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## EXPERTS:

Quincy Armorer  
(Black Theatre Workshop)

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## MODERATORS:

Emily Enhoring (English-Language Arts Network), Celine Cooper (Consortium of English-language CEGEPs, Colleges and Universities of Quebec, Bishop's University)

## Key takeaways

- This is a tough time for the arts because of the lack of proximity and intimacy.
- The way art is consumed in the future will change as a result of COVID-19.
- Art is usually experienced with other people. Social distancing makes it much more difficult to experience the arts.
- There is currently an abundance of time to be creative, but also to procrastinate.
- The learning process is different, with no in-person one-on-one learning.
- If the world that we are living in is a play, then this is the intermission. We will come back.

### Expert recommendations

- Theatres can use this time well by turning towards development and creation :
  - Hire playwrights to work on new works.
  - Hire actors to take part in workshops.
- Students looking for future employment can get in touch with companies in their field and reach out to them. Most companies and organizations are open to that kind of contact.
- Educational institutions in Quebec can help prepare students for careers in this sector in the following ways :
  - Keeping up with trends.
  - Putting things in the virtual world.
  - Giving students opportunities for internships and mentoring.

### Final message

Education has adapted to the virtual world, and we have to relearn how to learn and how to teach.

# HEALTH EXPERT SESSION

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## THEME:

COVID-19 may have created barriers, but it also made us see healthcare in a new, virtual way.

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## EXPERTS:

Khan Boubou-Dalambaye (Lester B. Pearson School Board), Samantha Bizimungu (Université de Montréal)

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## MODERATORS:

Anne-Marie Cech (Community Health and Social Services Network), Hugh Maynard (Provincial Employment Roundtable)

## Key takeaways

- Health as a career path can be tough because of elevated workloads, length of programs, and lack of connections.
- High grade results are required ; with no Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) in Quebec, grades are the only way for schools to make admittance decisions.
- Because of COVID-19, virtual care is becoming a cornerstone of medicine. Much can be done more efficiently online. This is good news because young people are adept online.
- In Quebec, the health system was hit particularly hard during COVID-19 because long-term care facilities (CHSLDs) were extremely ill prepared.

### Takeaways specific to the field of psychology

- For some, the challenge is the requirement of a graduate degree.
- The zeitgeist affects this industry more than most. These days, there may be more openness in the profession to members of the Black community and men than previously ; our cultural moment is more permissive of men talking about their emotions than it has been in the past.
- Because of COVID-19, the field of psychology has been given a boost ; it has been deemed an essential service.
- Becoming familiar and comfortable with online services matters.
- The field of psychology operates more than ever over the phone under COVID-19. However, without visual cues to assess body language, “ reading the room ” becomes more difficult.



### Expert recommendations

- COVID-19 has changed the way we deal with medicine and health studies, and moved a lot of it online. Young people considering this field, especially those who are more adept online, should see this as an opportunity.

### Final message

While medicine is evidently a highly exclusive field, COVID-19 may have unexpectedly allowed for new openings in the field and greater democratization of its services.

**Specifically for the field of psychology:** no matter how you approach it, psychology is a challenging field to enter. While COVID-19 may have boosted the demand for it, the pandemic also made it more difficult for this “talking/body language” industry to transition to a virtual context.

# TECH EXPERT SESSION

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**THEME:**

Tech is an industry in great flux, but Montreal presents some great opportunities in this field.

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**EXPERT:**

Jake Hirsch-Allen (LinkedIn, founder of Lighthouse Labs)

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**MODERATORS:**

Jean-Pierre Ngezigihe (Black Community Resource Centre),  
Anne Holding (McGill University's Human Motivation Lab)

## Key takeaways

- Most jobs for physics students are data analysis jobs. Some graduates face a difficult choice when offered this type of job. On the one hand, they may question its social value and therefore find it less enjoyable. On the other hand, it also means getting work in their field to get their foot in the door.
- Jobs that may seem less “enjoyable” could be extremely rewarding and pleasant after all. Learning experiences like that are valuable and can lead to job reinvention.
- Concordia University has its own startup incubator called District 3. If you are able to join an incubator program there, you can make significant progress within six months. Montreal is one of the best places in the world to be doing this. Networking of this kind is essential to building a career or a startup.

### Expert recommendations

- Take the jobs that are available, and keep applying for ones that are more interesting, especially in a pandemic when opportunities are scarce.
- Share your ideas ; don't remain in stealth mode.
- Tech is very accessible and inclusive. People shouldn't worry about needing to know how to code. The vast majority of jobs in tech do not require that level of technical expertise.

### Final message

- During times of job scarcity like these, it is best to take the jobs that are available, and keep applying for ones that are more interesting.

# VOCATIONAL AND TECHNICAL TRAINING EXPERT SESSION

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**THEME:**

Technical and trade careers have a great future but need more buy-in.

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**EXPERT:**

Alessandra Faraci  
(St. Pius X Career Centre)

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**MODERATORS:**

Adrienne Winrow  
(Youth 4 Youth Québec),  
Christopher Shee (Literacy Quebec)

### Key takeaways

- Many vocational programs are available. Popular sectors include Beauty Care, Maintenance Mechanics, Health Services, Metallurgical Technology, Electrotechnology, and Food Services and Tourism.
- There are many jobs available. The hiring rate right out of secondary-level vocational training is very high.
- Enrollment in vocational training is going up.
- There is a trend of immigrants turning to vocational training.
- Biases exist. People often turn to vocational training as a last resort. Moreover, social media can be problematic because vocational work is not necessarily promoted in positive terms. Also, some parents want their children to get a university degree. There may be a perception that, whereas university makes the world your oyster, vocational training limits you to a narrower path.

### **Expert recommendations**

- We need more programs at all levels, including the college and university levels.
- Youth should be encouraged to do what they are passionate about, whether it is academic or vocational.
- People need to know that some trades allow people to become entrepreneurs.
- We should have a PR campaign saying “the sky is the limit” if you take vocational training.

### **Final message**

While medicine is evidently a highly exclusive field, COVID-19 may have unexpectedly allowed for new openings in the field and greater democratization of its services.

# FINAL GROUP DISCUSSION

At this point in the forum, participants moved from their separate expert workshops back to the plenary group, reported on points that had been made, and discussed them further.

In the **arts**, the biggest challenge is getting experience and navigating the precarious nature of the field. At the same time, there will always be a need for the arts, and art has helped us get through COVID-19, so there is a sense of optimism.

There is a bias against **vocational and technical training**, but it's getting better. There may be a greater bias in the English-speaking community. It's important to counteract this to reverse the misconceptions.

Regarding **health**, the biggest barrier is the need for credentials and education. The effects of COVID-19 on the health industry have been immense. The changes have pluses and minuses ; they include things like remote



access, delivery of medicine, and Zoom consults. There is a question of whether people are as interested in working in health during COVID-19. There may be more positions available, but is the field less appealing because of perceived dangers?

The discussion about **tech** was interesting, showing that graduates don't necessarily go from university straight to a job in their field. Instead, there are a variety of pathways, including entrepreneurship and a startup culture. Also, there is a difference between dream careers and what expectations can/should be about regular work.

The forum concluded with a discussion about what learning institutions can do to help students in the post-COVID-19 world. Participants applauded opportunities like the FYI Forum for providing support.

Jake Hirsch Allen emphasized the importance of networking (and doing it efficiently) by telling the person you wish to network with the following: "this is why I am reaching

out; this is who I would like to meet; this is why I would like to meet that person." However, it could be as simple as asking someone to pass on a message or to point you in the direction of someone you can speak to.

Some participants said they feel that school can have the effect of boxing students in, and that co-op programs are few and far between these days in some fields. With COVID-19, a lot has been put on hold. That said, they also said that the ability to pivot was an essential skill. A person who has experience, say, as a bricklayer, can be a delivery person; a bartender can be a good call centre listener; and the fast food industry has repurposed lots of worker skills to face the new realities of COVID-19.

To wrap up, participants filled out a survey that showed they are hopeful for the future. The results were overall quite positive.

The kids are definitely (mostly) alright, and will continue to be!

Find out more about [QUESCREN](#).

Find out more about [BCRC](#).

Find out more about [Y4Y Québec](#).

Find out more about [CEDEC](#).

Thanks to everyone who participated in the event.

The Forum for Youth Insights was made possible through the financial support of the [Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise](#), the [Department of Canadian Heritage](#), [Concordia University](#), and the [Consortium of English-language CEGEPs, Colleges and Universities of Quebec](#).