

CHU de Québec Research Centre

The McGill Retention Bursary Program: Evaluation Report

Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project

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HIGHLIGHTS



Since 2011...

- 94 bursaries allocated
- 69 Category 1 bursary
- 25 Category 2 bursary
- 60 recipients
- 37 graduate recipients



Most influential factors on both retention and intention to return to region after graduation:

- Background (having a connexion with the region)
- Family and personal reasons



The bursary is or was an important factor on the decision to stay in or return to region:

- For 95% of non-graduate recipients
- For 67% of graduate recipients



Results from both interviews and questionnaires indicated that **88% of graduate recipients** who currently work in a targeted Quebec region, have respected and exceeded the one-year period imposed by the Program

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sociodemographic changes over of the past years and the regionalization of health services have impacted on Quebec's English-speaking communities. Consequently, these communities – especially communities located in rural and remote areas – are facing a shortage of health professionals. In 2011, the McGill Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project launched an initiative in order to improve the retention of health professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. This initiative resulted in the creation of a bursary program providing a financial incentive for students from selected Quebec regions who have English and French language skills and are pursuing full-time studies in the area of health and social services in a government-recognized educational institution located either outside or within their region. The McGill Bursary Program works in collaboration with community networks, which are expected to promote the bursary program and be responsible for selecting candidates and monitoring their progress after they obtained the bursary.

An evaluation of this bursary program was conducted, focusing on the components of the program (e.g. eligibility criteria, selection process, etc.) and its outcomes (e.g. recipient intention to return to or stay working in a selected Quebec region at the end of their training, potential impact of the bursary program on retention of health professionals in English-speaking communities, etc.). The objectives of the evaluation were 1) to describe the current processes related to the functioning of the McGill Retention Bursary Program; 2) to explore recipients' experience of this bursary program; 3) to explore community networks' experience regarding their collaboration with this bursary program; 4) to assess the effectiveness of the bursary program; and 5) to propose potential improvement strategies for the bursary program currently in place.

The evaluation of the McGill Retention Bursary Program was conducted between the months of July and November 2014. The targeted populations were bursary recipients and community networks involved in the McGill Retention Bursary Program. The study used a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies. The qualitative part consisted of nine semi-structured interviews with bursary recipients who had completed their studies at least six months before the time of the evaluation and seven interviews with key informants from community networks involved in the McGill Retention Bursary Program. The quantitative part of the evaluation consisted of a structured questionnaire composed of closed questions in order to complete the data collected during interviews with graduate recipients.

Interviews and questionnaire results indicate that a high proportion (88%) of recipients who currently work in a targeted Quebec region have respected and also exceeded the one-year period imposed by the bursary program, which can be considered a success. Moreover, the majority of them intend to continue working there for several years to come. Both qualitative and quantitative data inform that being native to the area and the fact of having family ties in the region are the chief factors influencing graduate health professionals' decision to work in this region at the end of their studies. Conversely, professional factors such as job opportunities and job satisfaction have less impact on retention of health professionals who are natives of the region where they work.

For most participants, receiving the bursary was an important incentive to return to their region after graduation because it allowed them to study without worrying about loans. However, according to the results of interviews and online questionnaires, financial factors are not at the top of the list when it comes to retention.

This evaluation also explored the issue of doing an internship in a selected region during a school career and how it could influence students' intention to return to this region after graduation. Due to the small sample, it was not possible to assess the relative contribution of internships and bursaries on intention to

work in a selected region, but the majority of recipients would appreciate having such an opportunity.

The collaboration of community networks is important for the development of this bursary program. They play a major role in both the promotion of the program and the recruitment of students. Achieving these various tasks represents challenges for community networks, particularly in terms of time and resources.

Recipients were generally satisfied with the bursary program. They agreed that the terms were realistic and the vast majority of them met all the conditions established by the program.

The purpose of the McGill Retention Bursary Program is to ensure the retention of health and social services professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. Considering the high proportion of graduate recipients who remain on the job in a selected Quebec region for at least one year, the primary goal of this bursary program seems to have been achieved. Participants also provided comments and suggestions for improving the program. Here are some recommendations based on the results of this evaluation:

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the evaluation results, we recommend the following:

- To create a formal follow-up mechanism for community networks in order to ensure that follow-up is carried out and that contact information is up to date. McGill could be the initiator of this formal follow-up, which could benefit community networks. Moreover, creating such a database would be useful for all further assessment activities. Follow-up should be done with the same frequency and could be completed by telephone in order to make direct contact with recipients, thus allowing them to comment or simply provide feedback concerning their experience if they so desire.

- To provide ongoing support for students through follow-up. A resource could be available within the community networks to answer all questions students might have during their school career. Once again, such a mechanism should involve direct contact between students and community networks. At the same time, it would be a good way to satisfy the needs of students asking for more information related to the bursary program.
- To create a database with the name of health professionals able to provide healthcare services in English. The starting point of this list could be all candidates who applied to the McGill Bursary Program. Such a database could be a useful for human-resources purposes in each community to meet needs in the area of healthcare and social services.
- To offer bursary recipients the opportunity to do an internship during their school career even if they already know the area where they have committed to staying or returning. This opportunity could help them to establish what the job is really like and if it is what they expected. Also it could be a good way to improve recruitment and retention. Previous studies have already highlighted the positive impact of exposure to the lifestyle of a particular region (especially rural and remote areas) during one's school career on recruitment and retention of health professionals.
- To provide financial resources to participating community networks, which could help them to be more efficient in the completion of their tasks. Thus they could spend more time on promoting the program, recruiting students, and ensuring follow-up of their recipients.
- To make more information concerning the contact person available to students targeted by the McGill Retention Program although a telephone

number and an email address are already provided in the application guide. This information could be included in a pamphlet given to candidates when community networks promote the program. Thus students would know where they could find information and who to contact when they have questions related to the bursary program and its terms and conditions.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report presents the results of the evaluation of the McGill Retention Bursary Program. The program evaluation was carried out under an agreement with members of the Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project at McGill University. The requested evaluation consisted of analyzing the effectiveness of the bursary program based on various factors. More specifically, the evaluation focused on the selection process and the components of the program (for instance, eligibility criteria and recipients' intention to return to or stay working in a selected Quebec region at the end of their training) and the potential impact of the program on retention of health professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. Hence the evaluation provides an overview of the current overall performance of the McGill Retention Bursary Program.

The following sections document results obtained from recipients and community networks involved in the McGill Retention Bursary Program. An analysis of the data is followed by recommendations concerning how the program is administered and applied. The purpose of these recommendations is to inform the project team at McGill about the influence of their bursary program on retention and on recipients' intention to stay in or return to a selected Quebec region to provide services to Quebec's English-speaking communities. Thus the project team will be informed of the strengths and weaknesses of their program so as to help them reach the objectives set.

The report has seven parts, including this introduction. The second part provides background information on the bursary program developed by the Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project at McGill University. The nature of the program and its components are presented.

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The third part of the report presents the study's objectives, followed by a methodology section that describes data collection and analysis. The fourth part of the report examines the impact of the bursary program on recipients' intention to stay in or return to a selected Quebec region after graduation. Particular attention has been paid to the retention of these new health professionals. Finally, the report concludes with a review of the study's results, proposing some recommendations on how to improve the current bursary program.

2. BACKGROUND

Sociodemographic changes over of the last years have impacted Quebec's English-speaking communities. The regionalization of health services has led to a reduction of services provided in English, especially in rural and remote areas, thus limiting access to those services in areas of high population concentration. In the Quebec context, English-speaking communities are called official language minority communities (OLMC), and most of them are located in rural and isolated areas.[1] By their linguistic component and their geographical location, these communities are already disadvantaged when addressing the issue of healthcare and services.[2] In addition to the reduction of access to health services, current policies also lead to a reduction of the health professional workforce. English-speaking communities in rural and remote areas were already facing a shortage of healthcare professionals before these policies were put in place,[3] but the situation is now even worse. Evidence shows that past positive experience in rural areas, having a rural background, and being aware of realities of work in rural and remote regions are all factors that contribute to improving retention of health professionals in these areas.[4-6] However, very few studies have explored the issue of retention of health professionals in English-speaking communities in a minority situation.

On the basis of current knowledge and on the regional program of access to health and social services in English as provided for in the Act respecting health and social services, the McGill Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project took the initiative to create a bursary program for the retention of health professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. In place since 2011, the McGill Retention Bursary Program provides financial incentives to students from selected Quebec regions. Students targeted by this program must have English and French language skills and be pursuing full-time studies in the area of health and social services in a government-recognized educational institution

located either outside or in their region. Students from secondary school vocational training, CEGEP/ college, and universities are all eligible for this bursary program. The primary objective of the program is to encourage English-speaking professionals to work in the health and social services system and, ultimately, to increase the number of those professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. In order to achieve this goal, students who are awarded bursaries must commit to returning to or staying in (depending on the region where they are pursuing studies) a selected Quebec region¹ following the successful completion of their studies in order to work for a minimum of one year in a public health and social services institution or related organization. The bursary program is divided into two categories, and the amount awarded to each student is established according to these categories and the student's level of study. Students pursuing studies outside their region receive a Category 1 bursary, which entails a commitment to return to a Quebec region. The amounts vary from \$5,000 to \$10,000 per year per student, the highest amount being reserved for the University level. Conversely, a Category 2 bursary is awarded to students pursuing studies in their region; these recipients have to commit to staying in a Quebec region for the one-year period mentioned above. Secondary school vocational training and CEGEP/ college students can receive up to \$2,500 per year, while this amount can reach \$5,000 for university students. The McGill Bursary Program works in collaboration with community networks located in each selected Quebec region. Each community network is actively involved in the program by promoting it while being responsible for the selection of candidates and for providing follow-up of bursary recipients. In the following sections, more details will be provided concerning the responsibilities of community networks.

After three years of operation, it seems appropriate to question the effectiveness of this bursary program. To do so, we must focus on the achievement of the program goals. The accurate way to determine the degree of success of stated objectives is to compare expected results with those obtained [7] and then find a

¹ A list of all selected Quebec regions is provided in Appendix A

way to maintain the situation or to improve it. In the present case, we need to look at the effects of the bursary program on bursary recipients' motivation to work in a selected Quebec region throughout their school career, and on their retention in Quebec's English-speaking communities after graduation.

3. OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this evaluation are as follows:

- 1) Describe the current processes related to the functioning of the McGill Retention Bursary Program;
- 2) Explore recipients' experience of the retention bursary program;
- 3) Explore community networks' experience concerning their collaboration with the McGill Retention Bursary Program;
- 4) Assess the effectiveness of the bursary program; and
- 5) Propose potential improvement strategies for the bursary program currently in place.

As mentioned earlier, community networks are actively involved in the bursary program. Among other things, they are responsible for the selection and attribution process. Since the networks are involved at each stage of the process, students wishing to apply for the bursary program must submit their application forms to the contact person at the participating community network in their region. The selection criteria remain the same for all candidates regardless of which category of bursary they are applying for. In addition to their commitment to returning to or staying in a Quebec region, interested students have to provide a history of their community involvement in a Quebec region and demonstrate good academic standing. The application form is also evaluated for its quality, content and presentation. Once community networks complete the selection process, each of them recommends three students who are eligible to receive the bursary based on the selection criteria listed above. In addition to their commitment to returning or staying in a selected Quebec region for a one-year period after graduation, recipients also agree to a follow-up evaluation by the McGill Project upon completion of studies if such a program is implemented.

4. METHODS

This evaluation of the McGill Retention Bursary Program was conducted between the months of July and November 2014. The targeted populations were bursary recipients and community networks involved in the bursary process with McGill. The study used a mixed-methods design, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection strategies. The qualitative part consisted of semi-structured interviews with bursary recipients who had completed their studies at least six months before the evaluation was conducted. The goal of these interviews was to document the experience of graduate recipients, the impacts that the bursary program had on their school and professional career, and their perception of different aspects of the bursary program. Other semi-structured interviews were conducted with a key informant of each participating community network to document their contribution to the McGill Retention Bursary Program and their experience with recipient students. They were also invited to comment upon the components of the bursary program, as well as the graduate recipients. The quantitative part of the evaluation consisted of a structured questionnaire composed of closed questions. This questionnaire was posted online and made accessible to all recipients (graduate or not). The main purpose of the questionnaire was to complete the data collected in the semi-structured interviews with the graduate recipients. Moreover, the questionnaire assessed recipients' intention to stay in or return to a selected Quebec region.

4.1 RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

Through the collaboration of the internal project team of the Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project, we were able to contact recipients and community networks involved in the McGill Retention Bursary Program. The project team at McGill gave us a list of all recipients of the program. Then each graduate recipient was contacted by email and telephone and asked to

participate in the evaluation. For the quantitative part of the evaluation, the same list was used to send the online questionnaire to all recipients' email. For their part, community networks were invited to participate by telephone and all information required to contact them was available via the Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project website.

4.2 DATA COLLECTION

A total of fifteen semi-structured interviews were conducted: seven with community networks and nine with graduate recipients. Data were collected in July and August 2014. The interview guide was first approved by the project team of the Training and Retention of Health Professionals Project, which wanted to ensure that it included all aspects needed for the evaluation of the bursary program's effectiveness.

In October 2014, the quantitative phase of the evaluation was initiated. All recipients of the McGill Retention Bursary Program were given access to a structured questionnaire of closed questions. They all received an email asking them to complete the questionnaire on an IT platform hosted on a secure web at Université Laval, which could be accessed through an Internet link.

4.3 DATA ANALYSIS

For qualitative data, a thematic analysis was performed from the data collected during the semi-structured interviews. A summary of the main idea of each interview was first transcribed and anonymized on electronic media. Then data were analyzed, identifying the major themes in the interviews. Themes were different for interviews with bursary recipients and those with community networks. The analyses related to interviews with community networks focused on the student recruitment process, application form assessment procedures, and student recipients' commitment and follow-up.

For quantitative data, descriptive analyses were performed based on responses from the online questionnaire completed by recipients. Data from interviews and questionnaires were triangulated in order to derive a deeper understanding of the bursary recipients' experience.

4.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The evaluation project was evaluated under the category “quality assurance, education or methodological development.” The evaluation showed that the research design appeared to comply with the principles governing research ethics and did not require approval by the CHU de Québec research ethics committee. Moreover, according to the bursary program application guide, when submitting the application form students automatically agree to participate in a follow-up evaluation by the McGill Project upon completion of studies in the event that such an evaluation program is implemented.

5. KEY FINDINGS

5.1 OVERALL PROFILE OF BURSARIES ALLOCATED SINCE 2011

Since the beginning of the bursary program in 2011, no fewer than 94 bursaries were allocated to 60 different students. Almost one third of students (29) received more than one bursary during their training period. In general, these students received two bursaries, but one of them received three. At the time of the study, 37 bursary recipients had completed the program of study for which they received a bursary (hereinafter referred to as graduate recipients), while 21 had not yet finished. Among the graduate recipients, three are currently pursuing studies in a different program in the area of health and social services and are still recipients of the McGill Bursary Program. There were also five cases for which the files were on follow-up, and for this reason, it was impossible to know which stage the corresponding recipients had reached in their school career.

Since the inception of the program, a majority of bursaries were allocated to students who were committed to returning to one of the selected regions after the end of their studies to work in a public health and social services institution or in a related organization for at least one year (Category 1). Table 1 below provides an overview of allocated bursaries since the beginning of the program in 2011.

Table 1. Overview of bursaries allocated since 2011

	Number of bursaries allocated per year			
	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	Total
Number of bursaries allocated	32	35	27	94
Category 1 bursaries allocated	19	23	27	69
Category 2 bursaries allocated	13	12	0	25
Bursaries allocated to university students	12	13	21	46

A total of nine community networks located in the following six regions are currently involved in the McGill Bursary Program: Estrie, Outaouais, Côte-Nord, Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine, Chaudières-Appalaches and Montérégie. Bursaries have been offered to students from each of the six regions. However, each year more than one third of bursary students are originally from the Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine region.

Table 2. Distribution of bursary recipients according to their home region and year of the bursary program

Regions	Number of bursaries allocated per year			
	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	Total
Estrie	4	3	0	7
Outaouais	3	6	5	14
Côte-Nord	6	7	5	18
Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine	13	12	11	36
Chaudières-Appalaches	2	3	4	9
Montérégie	4	4	2	10
Total	32	35	27	94

5.2 PARTICIPATION RATE AND DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS

For the purposes of the evaluation, a total of 16 interviews, lasting 30 minutes on average, were carried out with 9 graduate recipients and 7 community networks.

Initially, 22 graduate recipients, corresponding to those who graduated at least 6 months before the time of evaluation, were targeted. However, only 10 of them could be contacted, of whom 9 agreed to participate, for a participation rate of 90%. The reason for refusal was unknown since the person had two scheduled appointments for the interview but did not answer either time. Among these participants, six were awarded a category 1 bursary and the three others, a category 2 bursary.

The participation rate was similar (88%) for interviews with community networks. Eight different community networks were targeted, corresponding to the regions where graduate recipients of the McGill Retention Bursary Program currently reside. The contact person from each of these community networks was reached and only one of them declined the invitation without providing any reason.

An online questionnaire was also a part of the evaluation. All 60 recipients of the bursary program were eligible to participate. An invitation was sent to 57 recipients, considering that two email addresses were incorrect and another was not provided. In the end, more than half of the recipients that could have been contacted (31 out of 57) completed and returned the questionnaire.

5.3 GRADUATE RECIPIENTS

The impact of the bursary on the school and professional career, work experience, and career plan of recipients, incentives to return to or stay in a given region, and the components of the bursary program are the themes that emerged from interviews with bursary recipients. Financial, family, personal and professional factors/impacts stood out in the interviews, and codification was performed based on these themes.

5.3.1 Impact of the bursary

One of the main objectives of the bursary program is to increase the number of English-speaking health and social services professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. Job opportunities are a good stepping stone to achieving this goal because employment offer reflects the fact that needs are real. The selected Quebec regions appear to offer a broad range of jobs in the healthcare and social services area since bursary recipients had relatively good chance to be hired in a healthcare organization or facility in their region, according to their own claims. But beyond job opportunities in selected Quebec regions, the impact

of the bursary on recipients' school and professional career and their intention to return to the region after graduation was explored through the interviews.

For more than half of the respondents, being a bursary recipient encouraged them to stay in or return to their region, while others said this did not have a particular impact on their intention, simply because they always intended to do so. The main impact of the bursary program on school career is that it provides a financial incentive for recipients that allows them to concentrate on their studies while avoiding a mountain of debt. The program also has an influence on professional career. Community networks are actively involved in the entire process surrounding the program and one of their tasks is to promote it and give it a greater visibility among students. To do so, most community networks work in conjunction with healthcare organizations and facilities of their region in order to identify specific needs in the area of healthcare and social services. This collaboration with community networks allows healthcare organizations to be informed of the potential workforce available in their region, which opens doors to students, such as in the case here:

The advertising in the local newspaper concerning my getting the bursary, as I said above, led my employers to find out about my intentions. The bursary was a catalyst in my finding job, allowing me to get a foot in the door of my workplace even before I completed my studies. (Student 4 - S4)

5.3.2 Work experience and career plan

Although some participants always intended to return to their region after graduation, some of them faced challenges when it came to reaching their goal. For instance, a graduate recipient was unable to get a job in the selected region due to a lack of experience, and another had to apply over and over again before getting a job. With the exception of these two cases, bursary recipients did not experience major difficulties in getting a job in their region after completing their

studies, since eight participants out of nine work in the selected region.² All of them had been finished the program of study for which they received the McGill Bursary for at least six months, and six of them had already exceeded the one-year period imposed by the bursary program. Even if participants respected their commitment to return to or stay in the region for one year after graduation, they had different career plans for the future. Some intended to go back to school while others would like to change jobs or change their workplace, for instance by joining the private sector. Although the linguistic factor is a major component in the bursary program, it does not have a major impact on participants' work. All of them provide services to English-speaking clients, but this clientele represents only a small proportion of their total clientele (under 50%).

All respondents were working in a selected Quebec region,³ and the majority (7 out of 8)⁴ intended to work there for several years, while some planned to stay until retirement. Considering the clear intention of respondents to stay in the selected region, retention should not be a problem in their cases. However, it is still important to explore the factors that could limit their retention in the long run. Based on the interviews, family (partner's job location, having a family, etc.) and professional reasons (better job opportunities, career advancement and workload) were the most common reasons that could influence respondents to leave the region, whereas only one participant highlighted financial considerations. A minority of respondents indicated that nothing could influence their decision to stay in the region since they always intended to in any case.

5.3.3 Incentives to stay in or return to the selected region

After considering the factors that could influence graduate recipient retention, we explored the reasons that motivated them to return to or stay in the selected

² This respondent was unable to get a job in the selected region due to a lack of experience, instead working in another area until the necessary experience was acquired.

³ With the exception of one respondent who could not get a job in the region due to a lack of experience.

⁴ Does not include the participant who is not working in a selected Quebec region.

region. Considering that many factors could influence their motivation during their studies, a comparison was made between motivational factors reported by respondents at the beginning of their school career and at the end of their studies.

According to respondents, environmental⁵ and personal factors had the most influence at the beginning of their school career. Students wanted to return home because they missed their family and region. However, by the time they completed their study program, the students had acquired a great deal of knowledge about their future job and its realities, and some had the opportunity to do an internship. In addition to external factors (e.g. job opportunities, family situation, etc.), these elements may have changed respondents' perspectives and the way they consider working in their region. Personal reasons remained an important motivation for graduate recipients. Their desire to return to their family and friends still entered into the mix, but their desire to give back to the community had grown in importance. Professional factors such as job opportunities and position offered also had a significant influence. Tables 3 and 4 below provide a list of factors that motivated recipients to return to or stay in the region at the beginning of their studies and after graduation.

Table 3. Incentives that motivate students to return to/ stay in a selected Quebec region at the beginning of their school career

Incentives	Number of respondents*
Always intended to return (or stay)	3 out of 9
Quality of life in the region	2 out of 9
Personal or family reasons	2 out of 9
The bursary	2 out of 9
Want to give back to the community	1 out of 9
The kind of work in the region	1 out of 9

* More than one possible response per respondent

⁵ Refers to environmental aspects, such as the quality of life in the region.

Table 4. Incentives that motivate students to return to/ stay in a selected Quebec region after graduation

Incentives	Number of respondents*
Personal reasons	5 out of 9
Want to give back to the community	3 out of 9
Job opportunities	3 out of 9
The bursary	1 out of 9

* More than one possible response per respondent

Some educational institutions offered the opportunity to complete an internship in the student’s home region. Among the respondents, three had this opportunity. It helped one of them to find a job after graduation, and the other two explained how it allowed them to figure out what the job was really like. The majority (4 out of 6) of those who did not have a chance to do an internship during their school career would have liked to have had such an opportunity in order to acquire experience and to see how health facilities work back home.

5.3.4 Components and terms of the bursary program

The evaluation study includes a section on the bursary program’s components. The goal of this section was mainly to verify if measures put in place by the program seemed realistic and achievable from the recipients’ perspective. Their opinion, and that of community networks (which will be presented in the following section), will provide some avenues that could be explored by the bursary program project team in order to make changes to the current program. All graduate recipients qualified selection criteria and eligibility conditions as appropriate, but almost half of them (4 out of 9) commented on changes they would bring to the program if they had the opportunity to do so. These changes would especially concern information provided about the bursary program. Graduate recipients would have liked to have received more explanations concerning the amount awarded and the possibility of working in another

selected Quebec region rather than their home region. Another comment related to the bursary attribution process. According to a respondent, face-to-face contact between candidates and community networks would be a positive component of the process.

Since the main objective of the bursary program is encourage recipients to stay in or return to a selected region after graduation, follow-up must be done to ensure that the bursary recipients have met the conditions. According to the eligibility conditions, if recipients did not respect their commitment, they must repay the bursary amount received. In general, community networks involved in the bursary program seem to do a follow-up with their graduate recipients. Nevertheless, three respondents (from different regions) admitted that their community network sponsors never contacted them directly after graduation. The interviews conducted with community networks provide more details in this respect.

5.4 COMMUNITY NETWORKS

All participating community networks have been involved in the bursary program since its inception. Theirs is an active involvement considering they have a number of tasks to perform and responsibilities to meet. Among other things, they promote the bursary program, evaluate the application forms, ensure that students provide all required documents, submit all necessary information to McGill, ensure recipients respect their commitments, and find solutions if they do not comply.

5.4.1 Student recruitment process

When it comes to promoting the McGill Retention Bursary Program, community networks use different means, such as personal tracking and articles in local newspapers. According to key informants from community networks, the most

widespread measures are use of social media and the support of educational institutions (high schools, CEGEPs/colleges, and universities). Although they use various means to promote the bursary program, community networks may encounter some difficulties when it comes to recruitment. First, tracking students is not an easy task for several reasons, including the following: there are few bilingual students in the region; there is no English university in the area; and students from different programs of study are hard to reach. Above and beyond these factors, two informants from community networks highlighted the time required for the process, which is problematic not only for students but also for their organization. Students need to provide documents (i.e. letters of support) and it is sometimes difficult for them to get the necessary documents within the required time frame. With respect to the community network, the process is extremely time consuming (for the promotion of the program, the recruitment of students, and the evaluation of every submitted file).

To make student recruitment easier, community networks would need specific resources, which could help their organization. Indeed, a majority of the informants from a community network (4 out of 6) would like to have more funding, especially to free up staff members in the organization for recruitment and follow-up purposes. Both procedures require a lot of time, and additional human resources would be appreciated. Others would like to have more visibility through educational institutions of their area. For instance, they could have more organized contacts in CEGEPs and university departments. Educational institutions could be better informed about the bursary program and its goal, which could improve collaboration with participating community networks.

5.4.2 Evaluation of application form

In general, each community network evaluates up to five application forms per year, and half of the community networks confirmed that they recommend 90 to 100 percent of the applications evaluated for funding. There are several selection

criteria on which community networks base their decision, but community involvement is what makes a particular bursary applicant stand out. It is also the criterion that has the greatest impact when it comes to choosing the candidates. Next, grades and the quality of the application are considered. As mentioned earlier, community networks face a number of challenges during the selection process, and most of them are particularly related to the small size of the community/area. In a small community, it is not uncommon for most people to know each other. In such a case, selection committee members should remain impartial when they decide who will receive funding. Sometimes they know the applicants and their family situation, which makes matters difficult because “*the community expects a justification for our choice.*” (CN6)

5.4.3 Commitment and follow-up

When students receive their bursary, they all make a commitment to meet certain conditions; otherwise they will have to return the bursary awarded. Since community networks are in charge of bursary recipients, it is their responsibility to ensure that recipients respect their commitment. Half of the key informants from community networks interviewed conducted follow-up with recipients. Since there is no formal follow-up mechanism, each community network proceeds in its own way. Thus the frequency of this follow-up is also variable. In addition to follow-up, three community networks have developed a procedure to make sure students will return to their region to work and which measures would be taken if the commitment is not respected. The procedure consists of a contract signed by students to formalize their agreement.

At the time of the evaluation, four community networks (out of six) pointed out that all their graduate recipients had respected their commitment. The situation was different for the other two since three of their recipients had to repay the bursary. Situations like this demonstrate that above and beyond the financial incentive provided by the bursary, other factors can have a greater bearing on a

recipient's decision. The community networks concerned had a signed contract with the bursary recipients. Despite this, they were still left to deal with the issue. The option of doing community service was a solution offered by a community network for bursary recipients who were unable to repay the bursary awarded.

5.4.4 Components of the bursary program

The components of the bursary program were also part of the analysis. Here the challenges and impacts related to the involvement of the community networks in the bursary program were a focal concern of the analysis. Acquired data also made it possible to identify the strengths and weaknesses that community networks attribute to the current bursary program since they are in good position to highlight them based on their experience.

For half of the community network informants, financial incentives provide the possibility of studying without financial concerns, which is an important factor for the students. Two community network informants believe that the bursary has a beneficial impact on community since it promotes jobs in the area and is a good way to improve retention. Informants also highlighted some areas for improvement as regards the current bursary program. For instance, community networks would like to have a longer time period to complete the whole process related to the bursary program. More specifically, preparing the application forms involves a lot of time, which is lacking in community networks. The lack of a follow-up mechanism in the process, limited resources for managing the program, and the stress that the entire process puts on the organization were also mentioned.

Like bursary recipients, community network informants were asked about the changes they would like to make to the program. One said that offering ongoing support to bursary recipients throughout their studies could make a lot of sense, while another believes that creating a database including all the students who

applied might be a good move. Such a database could be useful for human resources purposes because the candidates who were not chosen could still be recruited by the community.

5.5 ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE

All bursary recipients received a link to an online questionnaire by email so that they might provide information to complement the interviews with graduate recipients. The table below provides a general portrait of those who completed the online questionnaire. A majority of respondents come from Gaspésie-Iles-de-la-Madeleine. Additionally, respondents are from twelve different programs of study, with highest proportions from nursing (42%), biomedicine (10%) and social work (10%). Moreover, almost half of the respondents (42%) heard about the bursary program through their community network, but educational institutions and friends were also important sources of information. Table 5 below provides more information on the characteristics of the online questionnaire respondents.

Table 5. Characteristics of respondents having completed the online questionnaire

	N	%
Age		
Younger than 25 years old	19	61.3
25-34 years old	8	25.8
35-44 years old	2	6.5
45 years and older	2	6.5
Region of origin		
05-Estrie	3	9.7
07-Outaouais	5	16.1
09-Côte-Nord	6	19.4
11-Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine	11	35.5
12-Chaudières-Appalaches	3	9.7
16-Montérégie	3	9.7
Level of study		
Secondary school	4	12.9
CEGEP/College	10	32.3
University	17	54.8
Category of bursary		
Category 1	25	80.6
Category 2	6	19.4
Completion of program of study*		
Yes	11	38.7
No	20	61.3

*Completion of the program of study for which the student received a bursary from the McGill Retention Bursary Program.

5.5.1 Graduate recipients' responses

Among the eleven graduate respondents, nine are working in a region targeted by the bursary program, and all of them have a position that will last more than a year. These same participants confirmed that they would still have chosen to return to their region without the bursary. Moreover, most of them intend to continue working in a region targeted by the program for several years to come. Wanting to be close to friends and family and knowing the area are factors that

have the most influence on the decision to stay in a selected region, while work possibilities and professional advancement have less impact (see Table 6 for more details). For many graduate recipients (67%), being awarded the bursary was an important factor in their decision to stay in or return to a selected Quebec region.

Table 6. Factors that encourage graduate recipients to continue working in a selected Quebec region

Factors in order of importance	
1.	Know the area
2.	Want to be close to family/friends
3.	Want to take up a new level of challenge
4.	The community (being tied to the community)
5.	The salary offered
6.	Work possibilities
7.	Opportunities for professional advancement

The (n=2) respondents who completed the program of study for which they received the bursary, but who are not working in a targeted region, both decided to pursue their studies at a higher level. However, data do not indicate if these recipients received another bursary within the McGill Bursary Program to pursue their studies.

5.5.2 Non-graduate recipients' responses

For 95% of non-graduate recipients, the bursary awarded is an important factor in their decision to stay in or return to their region. The same students were asked if they would still choose to return to or stay in a selected Quebec region without the bursary, and 80% gave a positive response. These students were invited to identify factors encouraging them to stay in or return to a targeted region. The most important factors identified by respondents included opportunity to be useful to the community, being close to family and friends, and knowing the

area. Results show that bursary recipients are less motivated by financial and professional factors.

Finally, a vast majority of respondents (26 out of 31) consider that they received an appropriate amount according to their level of studies, and all have a positive opinion concerning the eligibility criteria of the bursary program. In addition, some recipients shared their opinion on what could be improved in the program according to their personal experience. Among other things, they suggested that students who are already working in the region should not have to commit to a return since they are already in the region, and they pointed out that students would appreciate having more time to complete the required documents. Others have concerns about job availability, which could prevent them from fulfilling their commitment. Indeed, two participants said they were afraid of having to repay the bursary amount if no job was available in their region at the end of their studies. (Appendix B presents all suggestions and comments made by respondents).

6. DISCUSSION

A high proportion of recipients who currently work in a targeted Quebec region have respected and even exceeded the one-year period imposed by the bursary program, which is a clear indicator of the success of the program. Moreover, the majority of them intend to continue working there for several years to come. There are very good reasons why the bursary program is dedicated to students from selected Quebec regions. The program was created based on evidence from copious research indicating that a previous connection with the region is a significant factor influencing graduate health professionals' decision to work in this region at the end of their studies, and that having family ties is an important determinant as well. [8-12] Data obtained through interviews and online questionnaires also point in this direction. A recent study conducted by Winn et al.,[11] presents other results similar to ours, indicating that professional factors such as job opportunities and job satisfaction have less impact on retention of health professionals who are native of the region where they work. However, determining factors may vary depending on the job title of the health professional in question.[12]

Most respondents of the interviews agreed that the bursary was a good incentive to return to their region after graduation, while enabling them to study without an important load of debt. Conversely, interviewees indicated that financial factors have little influence on retention. This finding converges with data from the questionnaire indicating that a majority of non-graduate recipients would still have returned to their region without the bursary. Moreover, for the six graduate recipients interviewed who have been working in a selected Quebec region for one year or longer, it is most likely that they will stay in the region for a while to come. The McGill Bursary Program seems to be particularly successful with students from the selected Quebec regions. Indeed, it has been shown that when bursaries are allocated to students in order to force them to work in a region for a

limited period, they tend to leave once they have fulfilled their commitment, especially if they are not native to the area.[12] Our limited data do not allow us to compare bursary recipients for each category of bursary in order to see whether they experience different retention times.

The intention to stay in a region could be influenced by other factors that are not necessarily financial. The respondents intended to continue working in a selected Quebec region for several years, and most of them have already proven their intention by exceeding the mandatory one-year period. That being said, intention to stay on the job in the region may change over time. A study has shown that more experienced staff members intend to stay for a shorter period than less experienced staff (such as new graduate health professionals).[13] Considering that graduate recipients must work for at least one year in a selected Quebec region, the goal of the bursary program is being achieved. However, it could be worthwhile for further evaluations to explore the long-term impact of the bursary on recipient retention in a selected region.

The evaluation also addresses the issue of doing an internship during one's school career and how it could influence the intention to return to a region after graduation. Based on our limited sample, we cannot tell how influential internships are, but the majority of recipients would appreciate having such an opportunity. Some studies on recruitment and retention of health professionals have shown that exposure to a work environment during studies would encourage students to work in this environment after graduation.[8, 12, 14, 15]

LIMITATIONS OF THE EVALUATION

The first limitation of this evaluation is related to the small sample size. Although bursary recipients did formally agree to participate in an evaluation of the program, not everyone could be contacted, and some refused to participate. The time of the year in which the study took place (summer holidays) brought many

challenges in recruiting participants. However, the response rates for interviews and questionnaires were acceptable.

Another challenge that we met during recruitment is linked to the list of contact persons. Since contact information was not up to date or inaccurate, some people could not be contacted.

Finally, considering the small sample for the interviews with graduate recipients, we cannot claim that the results are representative of all recipients. Nevertheless, since the sampling was higher for the online questionnaire, the related results add weight to those obtained through semi-structured interviews.

7. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this evaluation is to provide a judgement of the overall performance of the McGill Retention Bursary Program. To this end, the evaluation was conducted using a mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) in order to meet the objectives targeted by the evaluation, which are as follows: 1) to describe current processes related to the functioning of the McGill Retention Bursary Program; 2) to explore recipients' experience of the retention bursary program; 3) to explore community networks' experience as regards their collaboration with the McGill retention bursary program; 4) to assess the effectiveness of the bursary program; and 5) to propose potential improvement strategies for the bursary program currently in place.

The results obtained have shown that collaboration with community networks is important in the development of the bursary program. The networks play a major role both in promoting the program and in recruiting students. Their work also includes follow-up with students throughout their studies to ensure that recipients respect the terms established by the program. Carrying out these various tasks represents some challenges for community networks, particularly in terms of time and resources. The fact that some community networks did not perform a direct follow-up with their bursary recipients is somewhat worrisome. These factors must be considered in order to find solutions that will facilitate their work and make it more efficient in the long term.

For their part, bursary recipients seem generally satisfied with the McGill Retention Program. Its terms appear realistic, and very few do not meet the conditions established by the program. Moreover those who are working in a selected Quebec region have exceeded the one-year period imposed by the bursary program and plan to remain for several years while upgrading their professional status. Good job opportunities and a desire to return so as to be

close to family and friends are the main reasons that prompted them to return and remain on the job.

The overall purpose of the bursary program is to ensure the retention of health professionals in Quebec's English-speaking communities. To this end, recipients must commit to returning to their region for a period of one year, a goal which, up to now, seems to have been met. It would thus appear that the program has achieved its objective over its first three-year cycle. Bursary recipients and community networks have provided a few suggestions to keep the program on the right track. Here are some recommendations based on the results obtained during the evaluation:

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To create a formal follow-up mechanism for community networks, and if possible, to standardize them for the community networks involved in order to identify the same kind of information about recipients. Establishing a formal mechanism would ensure that follow-up is provided and that contact information remains up to date. McGill could be the initiator of this standardized follow-up, which could be beneficial to community networks. Moreover, creating such a database would be useful for all further assessment activities. Follow-up should be completed with the same frequency and could be conducted by telephone in order to make direct contact with recipients and thus allow them to comment or simply provide feedback concerning their experience if they so desire.
- To provide ongoing support for students through follow-up. A resource could be developed by the community networks to answer all questions students may have during their school career. Once again, such a mechanism should involve direct contact between students and the community network. At the same time, it would be a good way to satisfy

the needs of students asking for more information related to the bursary program.

- To create a database with the name of health professionals able to provide healthcare services in English. The starting point of this list could be all candidates who applied to the McGill Bursary Program. It would be an important tool for community networks, as well as for managers of healthcare facilities. Indeed, this database could be useful for human-resources purposes in each community in order to meet its needs in the area of healthcare and social services. Even if such a database would be useful on a larger scale (provincial or national), the more modest database outlined above could be a good starting point.
- To offer recipients the opportunity to do an internship during their school career even if they already know the area where they have committed to staying or where they have returned. This opportunity could help them to learn what the job is really like and if it is what they expected. It could also be a good way to improve recruitment and retention. Previous studies already highlighted the positive impact of exposure to the lifestyle of a particular area (especially as regards rural and remote areas) on recruitment and retention of health professionals.
- To provide participating community networks with financial resources to help them become more efficient in the completion of their tasks, since their involvement requires time and resources to do what has to be done. Thus they could spend more time on promoting the program, recruiting students, and ensuring follow-up of their recipients.
- To provide more information concerning the contact person available to the students targeted by the program, although a telephone number and an email address are already provided in the application guide. This

information could be included in a pamphlet given to candidates when community networks promote the program. Thus students would know where they could find information and who to contact when they have questions related to the bursary program and its terms and conditions.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – LIST OF SELECTED QUEBEC REGIONS

The bursary program is applicable to students whose primary residence is in one of the following selected Quebec regions:

Region 01	Bas Saint-Laurent
Region 02	Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean
Region 03	Capitale-Nationale
Region 04	Mauricie-et-Centre-du-Québec
Region 05	Estrie
Region 07	Outaouais
Region 08	Abitibi-Témiscamingue
Region 09	Côte-Nord
Region 10	Nord-du-Québec
Region 11	Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine
Region 12	Chaudières-Appalaches
Region 14	Lanaudière (except for communities within the MMC*)
Region 15	Laurentides (except for communities within the MMC*)
Region 16	Montérégie (except for communities within the MMC*)
Region 17	Nunavik
Region 18	Terres-Cries-de-la-Baie-James

* MMC refers to the Montreal Metropolitan Community. Students from these communities are not eligible to apply for the bursary program.

APPENDIX B – LIST OF COMMENTS AND SUGGESTIONS

<p>It would have been great to have an extended bursary since my program lasted three years.</p>
<p>Offer more if the funds are available!</p>
<p>Students who are already nurses shouldn't have to return to their region if they are working in their region at the time of studies.</p>
<p>The selection criteria should be more explicit regarding the need to be bilingual.</p>
<p>The criteria were fine, but we had very little time to complete the bursary application, and there was especially little time for the referees to complete their work as well. We had to have the form signed, and sometimes this was hard given that we lived far apart.</p>
<p>The only thing that worries me is will they offer me a job at the end of my studies, because there are no available job postings in my region. Also if ever I do my internship in another place and get hired there, will I have to pay back my bursary (taking into consideration that Thetford Mines refused my application)?</p>
<p>Not having to stay in the area for a year after completion of studies, simply because most people cannot find work here and therefore they cannot stay.</p>
<p>On condition of successfully completing the program (whether university or CEGEP).</p>
<p>I received only one quarter of the amount. Offer the full amount of \$5000 instead of just over \$1000.</p>
<p>Considering the extracurricular activities in the region of origin and also extracurricular activities or voluntary work in the area of current study would make sense, especially since the latter are more recent and prove that the person applying for the bursary is still active in a community.</p>
<p>Maybe keep in mind that you might end up in another small region instead of your own after your studies. In four years many things can change (love, interest, opportunities, parents moving out of a region, etc).</p>

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