

# The school that puts you back in your place

“Where is it, this multiculturalism ?!” Jilefack asks herself when she discusses professional integration with other African immigrants. Indeed, many of her acquaintances who have immigrated to Canada find it difficult to get a job because, according to potential employers, they are not sufficiently steeped in Quebec culture and values. However, when we try to find out what they are, these Quebec values, the answer is rather evasive. Poor mastery of Quebec French<sup>[1]</sup>, cultural codes, a particular corporate culture ... there are many reasons cited for rejecting the candidatures of Mamadou, Marie or Ousman. Yet, it was because of the image sold to them of the open and welcoming character of its people that many made the decision to immigrate to Canada and settle in Quebec. They were also made to believe they would have the opportunity to get a job quickly, thanks to their qualifications and fluency in French. Multiple voices can be heard today denouncing this type of “systemic” racism, and we can’t help but question the values of openness and tolerance in which Quebec public organizations and public figures take pride.

## C’est bien de valeur

Since immigrant workers in Quebec are more often than not incapable of finding a job for which they are qualified, many of them are forced to work for free in order to accumulate working experience considered “relevant” in the eyes of the bosses. Yet the tasks they are asked to perform are those of a professional. Jilefack reports, among other things, the testimony of a man completing an unpaid internship in an engineering firm who was asked to perform complex coding. Without prior experience, he would have been unable to carry out the required tasks. Lack of Quebec experience and

potential cultural or linguistic differences are used as justifications for the difficulties encountered by immigrant students during their training courses.[\[2\]](#)

For example, Alfred, a fourth-year undergraduate student at the Université du Québec en Outaouais, was forced to interrupt his third internship because of the racism he encountered. In his cohort, Alfred had only two racialized colleagues: one, like Alfred, took extra time to finish, and the other ended up dropping his studies altogether.

Alfred has 14 years of teaching experience in Togo, his country of origin. The first course, an initiation or observation period, was therefore credited to him. But difficulties arose at his first teaching experience in a school in the Outaouais region. Alfred first met the contempt of his associate teacher who seemed to want to discredit him in front of the students. As part of an educational plan that had been duly approved by the teacher, she corrected Alfred before the group on a grammar question that differed between the French used in Africa and the one in Quebec . The associate teacher also perpetuated the subordinate role of the trainee by refusing to give him the keys to the rooms, forcing him to wait outside the class before work. Finally, the associate teacher confirmed her bias toward black people when she left the following comment in her mid-term assessment: " One would expect that you would arrive late." In addition to assuming the responsibilities of the internship, Alfred must meet the needs of his family. To do this, he must work at night, 16 hours a week. Given the difficulty of reconciling work and study, he had once showed up at most with a ten minute delay ...

These prejudices towards different cultural communities are maintained by employers and persist after training. As a result, many qualified individuals are denied employment and internships because they are perceived to be at risk of failing to understand certain social and cultural codes that

are not explicit; they would not know how to deal with certain “clienteles”. In nursing and social work, for example[\[3\]](#), working with a vulnerable or marginalized population seems to be an excuse for discriminating against immigrants.

Under the guise of defending diversity – openness to different gender and gender identities, different sexual orientations and different religious beliefs – employers and supervisors give themselves the right to question the ability of immigrant candidates to distance themselves from what they assume to be their values and beliefs in order to intervene adequately with a diverse population. This assumption further takes for granted that this openness is guaranteed among non-immigrant candidates, and forgets that the training course must notably be used to develop the know-how privileged by a profession.

## **« Why don't you talk like me »**

When it is not “values” causing problems, it is the linguistic peculiarities, or even the accent of the immigrant. Although many immigrants have been educated in French, differences in vocabulary are often associated with incompetence. In the midst of the internship, the criteria of speed of execution is important and trainees are expected to already master all vocabulary specific to a profession. Again, this desire to find trainees who already possess professional skills blurs the boundaries between an internship and a job. For immigrant trainees, the pill is even harder to swallow. Faced with the non-recognition of their training and professional experience, they must again prove their know-how in a context that is unfavorable to them.

These irritants are also present in the classroom as these students struggle to work with their non-immigrant colleagues. Some said they had been taunted in oral statements[\[4\]](#), but the exclusion was often less visible. Supervisors seem to be especially worried about the quality of written French. Urled, a student in social work at the Université du Québec à

Montréal, says she is often asked by supervisors how she copes with writing before they will agree to work with her. Since French is not her mother tongue, she is penalized in her work and examinations, which has an impact on the success of her studies.

## **« ...and think like me ? »**

Urled also witnessed the frigid reception of ideas and comments made by some of her fellow immigrants in the classroom. Sometimes confronted in their beliefs and cultures, many immigrants censor themselves. This concern is present among her colleagues, who refrain from participating in exchanges for fear of upsetting the sensibilities of Quebec students. In classrooms which are supposed to be a place of learning, exchange and emancipation, these students are prevented from fully participating.

In addition to their peers and teaching staff, students who are on probation must work in real-life situations, that is, with real students, real patients, and their real future colleagues. The support of the person in charge of the training thus becomes essential. When Alfred informed his associate teacher of the racist comments and messages he had received from students, she simply told him that she was aware of the lack of openness of the community to racialized people, but that she could do nothing about it. Alfred therefore had to resolve to end his internship

Other trainees are confronted with the impatience and barely veiled racism of their future colleagues. The rhythm and the frenetic working context in which employees evolve often do not make it possible to clarify the misunderstandings occasioned by mere marks of politeness, relationship to hierarchies and non-verbal communication. However, during the course, it is the whole person of the intern who is evaluated, and according to specific criteria that are localized socially and culturally. The many situations of ambiguity can cause

frictions with participants as well as with peers and have an influence during the evaluation process of the trainee.

## **An obstacle course**

Beyond the fact that the work situation can become unsustainable during the internship, the student has to find a placement ready to welcome them. In many programs, the trainees themselves must find an internship environment. The requirements of certain environments are high, equivalent to any job offer, and immigrant trainees are often penalized against their Quebec-born counterparts. Thus one of the students met by Jilefack had to resolve to accept an internship lower than that corresponding to her level of study because she could not place herself. Others are simply getting the door closed in their faces. This is the case of another student who confided to the researcher. While almost all of his colleagues of Quebec origin had already placed themselves, the student of Cameroonian origin and two other colleagues from Sub-Saharan Africa also applied to a company that sought trainees. They were then told that these places were no longer available ...

For her part, Urled explains that she is sometimes asked some very personal questions: she is asked, for example, to confide about the suffering experienced in relation to her migratory process. On the one hand, these types of questions constantly bring her back to her status of foreigner, that of the "Other". On the other hand, she also feels that she has something more to prove, as if she had to appeal to pity to be retained. This is without counting the many cases of students who must accept to be relocated, sometimes away from their family, to add a Quebec work experience to their resume. According to Jilefack, it is difficult for immigrants to meet the requirements of employers. The people she met made many sacrifices without getting great results.

## To be lulled by illusions

In an article published in *Maisonneuve*[\[5\]](#), Robyn Maynard draws attention to the history of colonization and the racial violence committed in the history of Canada . With reason, she asserts that it is not enough to console ourselves by comparing this history to the shameful past of our American neighbors. Indeed, in order to defy the current climate of racial hatred, the activist explains that it is no longer sufficient to deny a past of violence and hate crimes, arguing that we need rather to break with this legacy in order to concretely put into practice the national narrative of openness and tolerance on which Canada prides itself.

For if common values have been evident in the last 10 years (at least), it is more a question of attempts to exclude and reject the other than the opposite. Discussions on *accommodements raisonnables* and a proposal by the Parti Québécois to adopt a Charter of Values, among others, have contributed to reviving racial tensions and providing a favorable context for right-wing groups such as La Meute, and illustrate the existence of a social context increasingly tainted by open racism and xenophobia. More and more groups[\[6\]](#) and individuals are currently organizing in response to this rise of the extreme right, .

Just as it is no longer enough to denounce ordinary sexism and change its behavior on a daily basis, it is insufficient to denounce racism only its most spectacular form. Beyond the virtual indignation skillfully shared in a Facebook status and the systematic *like* of the latest intersectional flavored article, current and future struggles should tackle structures that reproduce discrimination and social exclusion. Without pretending that it is a panacea, the question of internships helps to put the spotlight on many situations of sexism and racism that have an impact on the living conditions of racialized and immigrant people.

These situations also exist outside the student movement, where there is a decline in full-time jobs in favor of an increase in contractual and part-time employment (atypical work). In a context where employers continually seek to reduce their costs of production and social rights become more and more intangible, many people are forced to agree to work for free in order to accumulate the necessary experience to hope to be hired or climb the ranks. A struggle of this sort makes it possible to confront the non-recognition of qualifications gained internationally, especially in the countries of the South.

The journey, marked by the pitfalls of immigrant and racialized students, is an example that adds to an already long list which shows the real role of internships. Of course, it is a place of training and learning, but the distinction between an internship and a job is very fuzzy. But education and internships serve, above all, to put one back in one's original place, whether you are a woman, a racialized person, a person with a disability, a person born in a working-class family or all of the above.

A text by **Sandrine Belley**, **Nicholas Bourdon** and **Valérie Simard**

*Thanks to **Ulred Comba Rodriguez**, student in social work at the Université du Québec à Montréal, **Alfred Kokou Gbidi**, an education student at the Université du Québec en Outaouais and **Jilefack Ngami**, a PhD student at the McGill School of Social Work for their testimony, corrections and time.*

\*

This article was published in the [Fall 2017 issue of the english edition of CUTE Magazine](#).

To learn more about the struggle for the full recognition of student work, to discuss or contribute to it, we can contact us via the [CUTE Campagne sur le travail étudiant](#) page.

- 
1. Jilefack conducts her work in an English-speaking context and asserts that mastery of the host language and accent is also a requirement of English-speaking employers. ↵
  2. Indeed, a recent study shows that immigrant students, as well as second-generation students, are over-represented among students in difficulty. Loslier, Sylvie. June 2015. The learning situation of Québec students from immigrant backgrounds: from theory to work experience. An exploratory study in the programs of *Social Work Techniques, Nursing and Integration in the Nursing Profession of the Quebec*  
<http://www.cegepmontpetit.ca/static/uploaded/Files/Cegep/Centre%20de%20reference/Documents%20divers/Situation-dapprentissage-stage.pdf>↵
  3. On this subject, the research of Loslier collects many testimonials of students. ↵
  4. *Ibid*, p. 43 ↵
  5. Maynard, Robyn. June 27. 2017. Ku Klux Kanada.  
<https://maisonneuve.org/article/2017/06/27/ku-klux-canada/>↵
  6. *Collectif Emma-Goldman, Antifa, Solidarité Sans Frontières*, to name a few. ↵