

A Century of University Education in Optometry in Canada: The Contribution of l'Université de Montréal – Part 2, 1990 to 2001

Dear Editor,

The year 2025 marks the 100th anniversary of university education in optometry in Canada, when l'École d'optométrie became affiliated with l'Université de Montréal in 1925. This anniversary is an opportunity to reflect on the school's history. The period from 1925 to 1990 was previously presented in a *Canadian Journal of Optometry* issue.¹ This issue addresses the pivotal period from 1990 to 2001 for the institution. The period from 2001 to 2025 will be presented in a future issue.

The Emergence of a Recognized University Research Unit

With its unit evaluation policy adopted in 1987, l'Université de Montréal was encouraged to promote the development of l'École d'optométrie with a grant for new resources. The school moved to a larger building within a new pavilion in May 1990. The official opening took place on October 18, 1991.

Since June 1, 1989, Professor John Lovasik, from the other Canadian school of optometry, served as the school's director. He was born in Montreal and graduated from McGill University, then obtained his doctorate in optometry (OD) and doctorate in research (PhD) from the University of Waterloo. His confirmed researcher profile made l'Université de Montréal a logical choice given the research orientation intended for l'École d'optométrie.

A New Research Impetus

John Lovasik's first term was a period of excitement for l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal

(ÉOUM), resulting from the convergence of several factors. The first was the relocation of l'ÉOUM to the ground floor of a building near the Côte-des-Neiges metro station, with triple the space to accommodate a larger and more accessible clinic. Moreover, the school finally boasted real research laboratories equipped with scientific and clinical instruments, thanks to the funding of three projects to the amount of nearly \$1 million. A limited

Figure 1. Professor John V. Lovasik, Director of l'École d'optométrie from June 1989 to September 1995



Under John Lovasik's leadership, the school became a recognized research unit that provides continuing education for optometrists to use diagnostic drugs. Professor Lovasik's research was awarded the 1998 Glenn A. Fry Award from the American Academy of Optometry. He was appointed professor emeritus upon his retirement in 2015 and was named a Silver Fellow of the Association for Research in Vision and Ophthalmology in 2016.

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Figure 2. The new pavilion, where l'École d'optométrie moved in May 1990, enabled it to triple its spaces and improve accessibility at its clinic



partnership of optometrists interested in receiving tax benefits from their investments in research and development provided the funding.

The second factor was the return of professors from career development leave and the arrival of new professors with PhDs, including Jocelyn Faubert, a specialist in visual psychophysics, and two optometrists trained in research by John Lovasik in Waterloo, Angela Kothe and Hélène Kergoat, graduates of the class of 1978 of l'ÉOUM. Indeed, all received multi-year funding from granting agencies and published regularly on behalf of the school. Finally, the departure of committed professors before the school's integration with the university allowed for the hiring of young assistant professors from the clinical setting. The number of full-time equivalent faculty members rose to 15 in 1993 with the arrival of two American professors, one a researcher, and the other a clinician.

The third factor was a significant increase in sponsored research, largely due to the success of young PhD professors. Federal granting agencies, such as the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), provided the funding. This growth was also supported by the steps taken by the school's director with the Medical Research Council of Canada in January 1991. Indeed, the federal granting agency finally recognized the eligibility of both Canadian schools of optometry for funding. An initial significant grant on aging visual function was awarded to a research team led by John Lovasik. Subsequently, several professors benefited individually or as a team from MRC funding, followed by funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). A new vision network, funded by the Fonds de la recherche en santé du Québec (FRSQ), was established in the following years, which also encouraged investments in research at l'ÉOUM. L'École d'optométrie was actively involved in creating this network, which included approximately 50 researchers from the four university departments of ophthalmology or fundamental sciences related to vision. This Quebec group contributed to the recognition of l'ÉOUM as a research unit and, therefore, to the eligibility of its professors for FRSQ funding.

The fourth and final factor was the implementation of an innovative formula for continuing education as early as 1990. As a member of l'École d'optométrie, le Centre de perfectionnement et de référence en optométrie (CPRO) was a collaboration between the school, as the main beneficiary, l'Ordre des optométristes, and l'Association des optométristes du Québec. A mandatory contribution created by l'Ordre provided five annual continuing education activities (e.g., courses, clinical workshops) organized by the school and voluntarily attended by optometrists. The CPRO was committed to providing a yearly lump sum of money for the school's development. With time, the formula evolved, and CPRO became a non-profit organization independent of its founding entities. However, it continued to support l'ÉOUM financially by allocating a yearly amount (currently \$70,000 to \$100,000).

This dynamic period was accompanied by exemplary philanthropic support. Indeed, the multi-year "Réussir ensemble [Succeeding Together]" university campaign provided the school with almost

Figure 3. L'École d'optométrie's acquired equipment: A device to assess the optical quality of ophthalmic lenses and optical systems by measuring their modulation transfer function



twice the funding as targeted by the university. As a result of this campaign, two graduates from the school contributed an additional \$350,000 to renew all instrumentation in the pre-clinical teaching lab.

The Constraints of Fiscal Turbulence

Shortly after the director's reappointment in 1993, the school was hampered in its development momentum. In 1994, the university faced a significant reduction in government funding. The school's budget was affected, with cuts of nearly \$60 million, creating internal tensions. For example, in 1994, an associate professor with an OD and PhD left for the pharmaceutical industry in the United States; then the two American professors decided to return to their country. The faculty complement then fell to 13 full-time equivalent positions. However, in 1995, following the retirement of a professor, l'ÉOUM recruited Christian Casanova, a neurophysiologist and assistant professor in the department of ophthalmology at l'Université de Sherbrooke, who completed one of his postdoctoral fellowships at the University of California Berkeley School of Optometry.

With the doctor of optometry (OD) program accreditation ending in 1993–1994, l'ÉOUM had to engage

Figure 4. Gilles Cloutier, rector of l'Université de Montréal, and two graduates, Raouf Greiche of the class of 1976 and Nagib Scaff of the class of 1970, on the left, inaugurated the equipped preclinical teaching laboratory thanks to their donation in 1993



Named after its donors, this lab was completely renovated in 2025 with additional philanthropic support from the Greiche & Scaff Group.

Figure 5. Professors Angela Kothe, OD, PhD, and H  l  ne Kergoat, LScO, PhD, are seen conducting a joint study in a research laboratory



The budgetary turmoil affecting the university resulted in Angela Köthe leaving the school for the pharmaceutical industry. Hélène Kergoat, a graduate of the class of 1978, had her research funded on an ongoing basis throughout her successful career at l'École d'optométrie. She was named professor emeritus in 2018.

in the renewal process despite the economic environment. Moreover, through no fault of its own, the Quebec institution found itself confronted with the only legislative framework in North America that prohibits optometrists from administering diagnostic drugs. At that time, 37 states in the United States already authorized optometrists to prescribe therapeutic drugs. This situation and uncertain financial environment led the Council on Optometric Education in 1994 to grant accreditation for only three years, with 10 recommendations and eight suggestions. The status even became Accredited with Conditions in March 1996.

In light of this situation, the school joined forces with l'Ordre des optométristes du Québec and l'Association des optométristes du Québec to obtain a legislative amendment. It designed a three-credit training course for practising optometrists on the use of diagnostic drugs. It developed the logistics for a team of professors led by John Lovasik, its director, to ensure training in eight Quebec cities. More than 900 optometrists participated in the third quarter of 1995. The process was not in vain,

since in November 1995, an order-in-council finally allowed optometrists to use these drugs. As the director's objectives were met, he terminated his term in the same year.

Alain Vaillancourt, the outgoing vice-rector and a former dean of the Faculty of Dentistry, acted as interim director of l'ÉOUM. In mid-December 1995, the university's council appointed Pierre Simonet as director. Having returned from the University of Waterloo with a PhD six years previously, Pierre Simonet had been with the school since 1977. Therefore, he had good knowledge of the workings and practices of l'Université de Montréal to weather the financial turbulence by maintaining what had been achieved.

Consolidating the Development of l'École d'optométrie

In the second half of the 1990s, the school faced serious challenges, including the ending of its accreditation program in 1997, the maintenance and expansion of its faculty complement, and the \$500,000 budget cut in 1996–1997, representing a

Figure 6. Professor Pierre Simonet, OD, PhD, was appointed director in December 1995



Pierre Simonet worked to consolidate the development of the school, both in research – with the creation of a first chair – and in teaching – with an in-depth review of the programs. The addition of a fifth year to the doctor of optometry program created eight new positions within l'ÉOUM faculty. In September 2003, he was appointed Vice-Rector for Planning and Vice-Provost at the university from 2005 to 2010. In 2013, he became the first professor emeritus of the school.

20% reduction from the previous budget. The new director implemented a multi-faceted strategy to address these issues in the short and long term.

The Creation of Management Margins

Considering that budget cuts could jeopardize the hybrid status available to the school, as soon as he took office, Pierre Simonet decided to shape his management team in a similar configuration to that of a faculty. The position of secretary of the school — modelled on that of a faculty secretary — was then created without opposition from the university and added to the other faculty officer functions, such as directors of clinics. Moreover, the director was able to staff the school with an administrative director, like the faculty structure, to replace the administrative assistant position that he intended to abolish.

The school's management team quickly adopted an official designation for the clinic, namely the

Figure 7. A promotional photo of the Clinique universitaire de la vision with the first logo designed when this official designation was adopted in 1996



The Clinique universitaire de la vision became a reference centre for the profession and saw its traffic grow rapidly.

Clinique universitaire de la vision, a fairly general name that would allow it to accommodate ophthalmologists. L'ÉOUM then positioned the clinic as a centre of expertise for the profession by developing referral mechanisms for all optometrists in Quebec.

At the same time, the school consolidated its teaching staff by making good use of the special status of visiting professor. As such, it replaced departures from previous years by hiring five half-time visiting professors to provide clinical tasks. This approach resulted in increased attendance at the clinic as well as revenue. The number of patients examined doubled within a decade, from 7,069 in 1994 to 13,906 in 2004. The school converted its guest professor positions into regular full-time or part-time positions as financial margins increased. It quickly returned to full-time equivalent of 15 positions.

The school's budget margin also increased thanks to an international partnership agreement signed in 1998–1999 with l'Université Paris-Sud in France. That university developed a master's degree in physiological optics and optometry for French professionals. (Recall that optometry does not have a legal existence in France, but more advanced opticians practice it by being allowed to perform refraction.) L'Université Paris-Sud welcomed l'ÉOUM's offer to provide clinical training in its program for a fee. For example, professors from the school went

to teach intensively in Paris in the spring, while French interns received clinical training in Quebec during the summer. Some even received a master's degree in Montreal. This agreement continued for more than a decade. Exchange agreements were also signed with two other French universities.

The school's financial margin also increased given the quality of its research professors, who were already engaged or hired between 1995 and 2000. Indeed, five of these research professors received the status of research fellows from major granting agencies and the salary funding associated with that status. For example, in 2000, l'École d'optométrie had the highest percentage of full-time professors at l'Université de Montréal. These salary grants enabled l'ÉOUM to consolidate research development by freeing these professors from certain teaching tasks.

L'École d'optométrie's close relationship with the French industry group Essilor, then the world leader in ophthalmic optics, led to the establishment of the first research chair at the school in 1999, with support from NSERC. Professor Jocelyn Faubert was awarded the NSERC-Essilor Industrial Chair in Presbyopia and Visual Perception, funded to the amount of \$1 million over five years. It was a first in Canada and included the hiring of a new professor under grant. The school received two more chairs in the next decade.

Research funding for l'École d'optométrie increased from less than \$10,000 in 1989 to \$5,539,736 in 2001, including a Canada Foundation for Innovation grant of \$2,645,974. This increase reflected the emergence and consolidation of recognized research unit status that was now available to l'École d'optométrie.

Development Resulting from a Major Program Review

In a period of consolidation, the school underwent significant changes to its curricula. First, in 1997, the master's degree in physiological optics changed its name to a master's degree in vision sciences and, in particular, was divided into two options: the basic sciences option remained a master's degree with a dissertation, while the clinical sciences option introduced a professional master's degree where the dissertation was replaced by directed study. Simultaneously, the school created a 30-credit

Figure 8. Virtual reality equipment for research on presbyopia and visual perception was used by Professor Jocelyn Faubert, PhD, NSERC-Essilor Industrial Chair



advanced graduate diploma (AGD) in vision sciences for graduates wishing to pursue training. This diploma enabled a direct transfer to the professional master's degree for candidates who obtained 15 credits. Finally, after welcoming a clinical service point from the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille to its premises in early 1998, the school set up another AGD in 2000 for visual impairment intervention to train specialists in orientation and mobility. Subsequently, in 2002, the visual impairment intervention option was offered for the clinical science master's degree. This was a vocational master's degree in visual impairment rehabilitation.

All these changes at the graduate level would quickly increase student enrolment. Indeed, while there were at most two master's graduates per year until 1999, this number rose to four by 2000 and then to 12 by 2004.

At the undergraduate level, l'ÉOUM management saw an opportunity to modify its program when the Faculty of Dentistry and the Faculty of Veterinary Medicine began work to add a preparatory year to their professional doctorate in 1997–1998. Following a similar approach, the school's leadership had three objectives:

1. introduce training on the use of drugs for therapeutic purposes,
2. maintain alignment with doctorates in dental and veterinary medicine, and

Figure 9. René Simard, Rector of l'Université de Montréal, with Gabriel Collard, Director of the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille and Pierre Simonet, Director of l'École d'optométrie, inaugurating the Institute's point of service in the school



The welcome of the Institut Nazareth et Louis-Braille was a beneficial partnership that resulted in the creation of graduate programs in visual impairment intervention.

3. increase the number of faculty members, since the addition of a preparatory year would require maintaining a stable student–professor ratio.

To implement this new undergraduate program, l'ÉOUM ensured that a team of professors and clinicians received the 100-hour training on the use of therapeutic drugs offered by the Pennsylvania College of Optometry in Philadelphia during the 1997–1998 year in Moncton. Initially, this training was intended for optometrists in New Brunswick in anticipation of changes to the law governing their profession, and l'ÉOUM team joined them. In turn, in December 1998, the school presented a program structure with a preparatory year of 39 basic science credits, followed by the four years of 155 doctoral credits in optometry (OD) to the Commission des études de l'Université de Montréal. A summer session was maintained between the last two years to ensure continuity of the clinic's services. The duration of undergraduate studies consisted of 11 sessions over five years.

Figure 10. Claire McNicoll, Vice-Rector of Education at l'Université de Montréal, opened the first training session on the use of therapeutic drugs on May 29, 1999



The new program began in September 1999. As it provided training on the use of therapeutic drugs, it strongly supported the profession's efforts to amend the legislation. At the same time, l'ÉOUM established a continuing education program for practising optometrists on the use of these drugs. The impact was rapid. On June 14, 2000, Bill 87 was passed by the National Assembly of Quebec to allow optometrists to prescribe therapeutic agents and provide eye care.

As this program now had five undergraduate cohorts, the school finalized a planning agreement with university management in 2001 to add eight full-time equivalent faculty members to its staff of 15.5 positions by 2003.

The redesign of the undergraduate program, combined with a government reinvestment in universities, enabled the school to achieve the highest number of new faculty members in proportion to its size compared to all other university units. Therefore, by

Figure 11. Professor Jacob Sivak, OD, PhD (centre), Robert Lacroix, Rector of l'Université de Montréal (left), and Pierre Simonet, Director of l'École d'optométrie (right), in November 2000



L'Université de Montréal paid tribute to Professor Jacob Sivak, then Director of the School of Optometry at the University of Waterloo and a graduate of l'ÉOUM class of 1967. In recognition of his significant contribution to vision sciences, the institution awarded him an honorary doctorate, which Professor Pierre Simonet sponsored.

2003–2004, l'ÉOUM faculty increased to 24.5 full-time equivalent positions.

During the visit of the Council on Optometric Education in 1997, as part of the renewal of l'ÉOUM's accreditation, the organization extended the status of Accredited with Conditions for four years — mainly because of the university's financial context, which had not changed much, and the legislative discrepancy regarding the use of therapeutic agents between Quebec, which still prohibited it, and 49 states, which now authorized it. However, the accreditation body made only six recommendations and three suggestions. In March 2001, they made another visit and, in July 2001, the school regained its seven-year, unconditional full accreditation. L'ÉOUM's accreditation has always been renewed in this way.

In conclusion, the period from 1990–2001 was a pivotal time for l'École d'optométrie de l'Université de Montréal, which became a recognized research unit. During these years, l'ÉOUM faced fiscal turbulence that affected the accreditation of its program. Fortunately, thanks to rigorous and dynamic management, the school found considerable leeway in consolidating its development as a teaching

and research unit, notably by increasing its faculty complement and beginning to diversify its program offerings. L'ÉOUM also directly contributed to the profession obtaining two legislative changes it needed to thrive regarding the use of drugs.

The next and final piece of this historical overview will demonstrate how l'École d'optométrie has continued to grow to date.

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To view a full list of references, please view this article online at <https://openjournals.uwaterloo.ca/index.php/cjo/index>

The image shows the cover of the book "Eyefacets: The Eye from Many Angles" by T. David Williams, Professor Emeritus at the School of Optometry & Vision Science, University of Waterloo. The cover features a stylized illustration of an eye with a blue and orange flame-like shape. Below the title, it says "Now available to order at Amazon.ca". At the bottom, there is a list of features under the heading "Eyefacets:" and a call to action "Order your copy today."

Eyefacets
The Eye from Many Angles

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