

HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COUNCIL OF ONTARIO (HEQCO) Research Plan 2012-2013

In 2012-13, HEQCO will focus on key research and analyses within its legislated mandate to assist:

- **MTCU**, in its efforts to ensure that Ontario's higher education system delivers a higher quality education to more students in a more effective manner.
- **Ontario's colleges and universities**, as they grapple with increased enrolment, greater international competition, the imperative to contribute to a healthier and more robust Ontario economy and quality of life, all within a very constrained financial reality.
- **Students and the public**, as they seek to make better and more informed choices about accessing and navigating an increasingly complex higher education environment to obtain an affordable and timely education that promotes their personal, learning and professional aspirations.

HEQCO's research plan is described within the three mandate areas identified in the Act that established the agency in 2005. These areas are: accessibility, quality and accountability.

Accessibility

Providing access for every qualified student remains a key priority. Government policies and funding have already enabled impressive gains in enrolment. In fact, over the McGuinty years, postsecondary enrolment in Ontario has grown more than any other province in Canada. However, if we are to achieve the government's goal of a 70% postsecondary attainment rate, we must recognize that the 21st century learner is no longer just the 18-24 year old student going directly from high school to college or university. Rather, to meet the goal of an educated citizenry, we need to do a better job of accommodating older life-long learners; attracting students who are not accessing higher education in appropriate numbers; and encouraging student success for those who are dropping out of postsecondary programs in too high numbers.

Specific HEQCO projects in 2012-13 that will address these issues are:

1. Evaluating the adequacy and efficiency of non-traditional pathways into postsecondary education.
2. Analysing how to ameliorate the high dropout rate of students in apprenticeship programs.

3. Conducting faculty, student and employer surveys to evaluate the effectiveness of existing Work-Integrated Learning opportunities, and explore ways to expand opportunities for students to prepare them better for the labour market.

Quality

There is considerable discussion and recognition that the quality of the educational experience in the Ontario postsecondary system may have diminished. To no small extent this may be due to the success Ontario has had in increasing enrolment. Nevertheless, quality is the international currency by which higher education systems are evaluated and the value of credentials from Ontario institutions is assessed. Our obligation is to graduate students with credentials that are understood, both within Canada and around the world, as reflecting a high quality, high value, progressive and modern education. The majority of HEQCO's efforts in 2012-13 will examine how we can sustain, if not enhance, the quality of the Ontario student experience even in light of fiscal constraints.

Our quality agenda has two major themes. The first is to engage Ontario postsecondary institutions in a series of research projects to identify and measure desired learning outcomes associated with specific credentials the system offers: diplomas and certificates, baccalaureate degrees and graduate degrees. Learning outcomes refers to what students should know, understand, and be able to do upon completion of their programs. This work also engages Ontario with some of the highest profile projects and organizations conducting this work internationally.

Specific HEQCO projects in 2012- 13 on quality related to learning outcomes include:

1. Publication of a monograph on *Measuring the Value of a Postsecondary Education* based on our 2011 international conference, which convened some of the leading learning outcome experts from around the world.
2. Research with Ontario colleges and universities to evaluate effective techniques for teaching large classes, innovative use of technology in the classroom, and professional development for new faculty.
3. Research with Ontario colleges and universities to identify and measure desired learning outcomes in the social sciences, physical sciences, and life and health sciences.
4. In collaboration with Colleges Ontario and the Council of Ontario Universities, convening a workshop in April 2012 on assessment techniques to measure learning outcomes.
5. Leading the Ontario participation in the OECD-sponsored Assessment of Learning Outcomes in Higher Education (AHELO) project examining civil engineering outcomes in Ontario and seven other countries.

6. As part of an international project, testing the validity of the Collegiate Learning Assessment and Community College Learning Assessment in the Ontario context, working with a group of Ontario universities and colleges across a range of disciplines.

The second quality theme evaluates the relationship between postsecondary education and labour outcomes and economic impact. One of the primary reasons governments support colleges and universities is because they understand the centrality of higher education in contributing to a robust and vibrant, knowledge-based economy. Similarly, students say that their primary reason for seeking a postsecondary education is their desire to obtain the credential necessary to get a good job. Understanding the linkage between higher education and labour market outcomes is a major area of focus for governments and students, and that is why it represents the second major theme in our research on the quality agenda. Specific HEQCO projects in 2012- 13 that will explore this issue include:

1. Publication of an extensive evaluation of the impact of the Ontario investment in graduate student expansion, particularly an examination of the experiences, pathways and labour outcomes of the growing number of doctoral candidates at Ontario universities.
2. Research on the relationship between literacy rates and assessments in Ontario high schools and postsecondary institutions, and the importance of literacy as an “essential skill” on the 21st century labour market.
3. A comprehensive series of studies on labour market outcomes of students graduating from Ontario postsecondary institutions using the National Graduate Survey.

Accountability

All governments are holding their public postsecondary systems to greater account, reflecting greater scrutiny of how they spend the public purse. Holding institutions accountable, however, needs to be balanced against and respectful of institutional autonomy and independence. Governments also seek to ensure that public dollars are spent cost-effectively while maximizing the attainment of publicly-desired goals.

Ontario has been hit hard by the recession and faces several years of considerable belt tightening. The province’s ability to mitigate and eventually eliminate its anticipated deficits will require a change in the way the public sector is managed and resourced. In short, an acute area of government and institutional focus in the future will be how to grow, do more, and do it better, with little if any incremental resources. This challenge represents a significant area of research and analysis for HEQCO.

Our research on this challenge involves analyses of the quality and cost implications of different funding regimes, teaching methods, changes in the way institutions in the system relate to one another and student mobility between institutions. Fortunately, Ontario is not alone in the challenge of providing a higher quality education to more students at less cost. Many jurisdictions around the world are experimenting with innovations and changes designed to meet this challenge. HEQCO will gather the best practices of these experiments and innovations from around the world and examine their applicability and benefits to Ontario.

Specific HEQCO projects in 2012- 13 on accountability include:

1. Creation of a dashboard to monitor the performance of Ontario's postsecondary sector.
2. Exploring how to implement an effective and useful funding model based on negotiated institutional mandates.
3. Continuing advice to government on international best practices to transform public higher education systems with the greatest cost effectiveness, with applicability of these practices to Ontario.
4. Evaluation of the cost and quality implications of 2+2 (college to university transfer credit) transfer policies and, in general, the implications and outcomes of greater college involvement in degree granting.

Our research plan and our service to the sector are informed by community feedback and outreach. Among initiatives in the coming year: a HEQCO speaker series featuring innovators from Canada and throughout the world who will help spark creative thinking on the issues of accessibility, quality and accountability; and a fall research and policy conference following the success of 2011's learning outcomes and financial literacy conferences. We will also continue our series of @Issue papers, which synthesize the most topical research in the sector and provide policy advice related to that research.