

**Ministry of Colleges and
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November 23, 2021

Suzanne Herbert
Acting Chair
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

Dear Ms. Herbert,

As you begin planning for 2022-23, I am pleased to write to you in your capacity as Acting Chair of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Pursuant to the requirements of the Agencies and Appointments Directive, this letter sets out my expectations for HEQCO for the 2022-23 fiscal year. In addition, this letter includes updates to the 2021-22 mandate letter.

Ontario's board-governed agencies are vital partners in ensuring the delivery of high-quality services to Ontarians. The work that you and your fellow board members undertake to establish the goals, objectives, and strategic direction for HEQCO ensures that the agency is meeting its mandate. It is important that this direction is consistent with government priorities, your agency mandate, key policies and directives and my directions, where appropriate. I thank you for your willingness to serve.

As you know, as outlined in the *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act, 2005*, your agency's mandate is to assist me in improving all aspects of Ontario's postsecondary education sector, including improving the quality of, and access to, postsecondary education, and enhancing the accountability of Ontario's publicly-assisted colleges and universities. In October 2018, HEQCO was given the additional function to research and evaluate how free speech is being addressed at these institutions and across the postsecondary sector, as well as to provide reports and recommendations to the ministry on the results of such research and evaluation. In December 2019, HEQCO's evaluation function was further expanded to include Minister specified evaluations of the ministry's programs and services, or other postsecondary education (PSE) programs and services provided or funded by the Government of Ontario.

Updates to 2021-22 Priorities:

Two items set out below update the priorities in the HEQCO 2021-22 mandate letter of January 28, 2021. Updates include an additional research priority for fiscal year 2021-22 and an update on agency sector priorities that apply to the agency for 2021-22.

Review of Ontario's Credentials

Building on HEQCO's existing research underway on the mix of PSE credentials in Ontario, and as outlined in the November 9, 2021 memo, HEQCO will undertake research and provide recommendations to the ministry on the potential expansion of degrees in Ontario's publicly-assisted colleges, in relation to how the current credential mix in Ontario is meeting learner and labour market needs and to identify any gaps. The scope of the work will include, but may not be limited to, analyzing the current and potential future mix of credentials in relation to student and labour market needs and providing forward-looking recommendations and implementation considerations.

Agency Sector Priorities for 2021-22

The 2021-22 mandate letter included six priority areas for the agency sector. An update on the scope for the Competitiveness, Sustainability and Expenditure Management priority is set out below. This is meant to update the expectations identified in the January 28, 2021 letter under this one priority area, with the other five sector priority areas remaining unchanged. Updated expectations for Competitiveness, Sustainability and Expenditure Management include:

- operating within your agency's allocations
- identifying and pursuing efficiencies and savings
- complying with applicable direction related to supply chain centralization, Realty Interim Measures and Agency Office Location Criteria

2022-23 Priorities:

Postsecondary Education Priorities

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on youth and students. The 2021 Ontario Budget included government investments focused on making PSE more affordable by freezing tuition fees, addressing PSE institutions' financial challenges related to COVID-19, expanding virtual learning and ensuring that graduates meet the needs of Ontario's labour market including increased access to micro-credentials to support economic recovery. In addition, to support the long-term care sector, publicly-assisted colleges will be delivering accelerated training of personal support workers (PSWs) by training up to 8,200 new PSWs.

HEQCO is mandated to undertake research, evaluations and recommendations to inform and support the ministry's work. It is important that the Council's research, evaluations and recommendations align with the ministry's priorities. HEQCO's focus on improving the quality, access and accountability/system design of the postsecondary sector and the agency's key role on free speech, aligns well with ministry priorities. HEQCO will continue to play an important role in 2022-23 in supporting government priorities. I expect HEQCO to focus on the following priorities.

Evaluation of the Virtual Learning Strategy

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of flexible and accessible virtual learning to help all learners acquire the skills they need to succeed. To help expand access to high-quality, in demand, globally competitive virtual education, the government announced the investment of \$50 million in a new Virtual Learning Strategy in December 2020. This was bolstered by an additional \$21.4 million over two years (2021-22 and 2022-23). To inform the ministry of gaps that persist across the sector and to ensure that the Virtual Learning Strategy is achieving its objectives, in order of priority, HEQCO will:

- Undertake a comparative analysis of outcomes (e.g., graduation rate, graduate employment, graduate earnings) for Ontario postsecondary learners participating in online learning models relative to those participating in traditional in-class instruction.
- Work with the ministry to design and undertake an evaluation of the Virtual Learning Strategy and its accompanying investment to measure outcomes from the Strategy. Areas of focus could include but are not limited to:
 - perceptions about the quality of online learning;
 - faculty engagement and enthusiasm in using technology-enabled tools and resources;
 - institutional capacity to leverage digital learning to ensure continuity of learning during times of disruption;
 - student engagement and fluency with virtual learning platforms and resources;
 - equitable access to online learning opportunities for learners in rural, remote, and Northern communities;
 - reported student savings;
 - financial and quality impact resulting from inter-institutional collaboration to develop and distribute virtual learning content, tools, and resources;
 - course and program completion rates; and
 - employment outcomes.
- Work with the ministry and Ontario's publicly-assisted postsecondary institutions to identify opportunities for improving data collection specific to virtual learning and related outcomes in an effort to augment the ministry's data related to virtual learning beyond third party reporting from organizations such as the Canadian Digital Learning Research Association (CLDRA) and Statistics Canada.

Campus Free Speech Policy

I would like to thank you for your third annual report on campus free speech in Ontario posted on November 19, 2021. HEQCO's free speech role to monitor and evaluate ongoing implementation of the Campus Free Speech Policy continues to be a priority for the ministry. To continue to assist me in improving the postsecondary education sector by supporting free speech rights on Ontario campuses, HEQCO will:

- Receive annual reports from each publicly-assisted college and university in Ontario regarding ongoing implementation of a free speech policy and develop an analysis report for the Minister.

- Assess whether each institution has satisfactorily implemented a free speech policy based on the minimum standard issued by the Minister, and whether all reporting requirements have been met.
- Report on free speech complaints against publicly-assisted colleges and universities that have been reported by the Ontario Ombudsman, and how many of these complaints are unresolved or unsatisfactorily resolved.
- Develop a public report annually that summarizes annual institutional reports, assesses whether institutions are compliant and the degree to which any institution is non-compliant. Evaluate system-level progress in implementing free speech policies.

Priorities for Agency Sector

As part of the government of Ontario, agencies are expected to act in the best interests of Ontarians by being efficient, effective, and providing value-for-money to taxpayers. Our government's primary focus is to protect every life and every job we possibly can. Without healthy people, we cannot have a healthy economy. We are confident that the people of Ontario are going to unleash the economic growth that is necessary for job creation, prosperity and a stronger province. Government-wide expectations for agencies to reflect in HEQCO's business planning process include:

1. Competitiveness, Sustainability and Expenditure Management

- operating within your agency's financial allocations
- identifying and pursuing opportunities for innovative practices
- complying with applicable direction related to supply chain centralization and Realty Interim Measures for agency office space
- leveraging and meeting benchmarked outcomes for compensation strategies and directives
- working with the ministry, where appropriate, to advance the *Ontario Onwards Action Plan*

2. Transparency and Accountability

- abiding by applicable government directives and policies and ensuring transparency and accountability in reporting
- adhering to requirements of the Agencies and Appointments Directive, accounting standards and practices, and the *Public Service of Ontario Act* ethical framework, and responding to audit findings, where applicable
- continuing to identify appropriate skills, knowledge and experience needed to effectively support the board's role in agency governance and accountability

3. Risk Management

- developing and implementing an effective process for the identification, assessment and mitigation of risks, including planning for and responding to health and other emergency situations, including but not limited to COVID-19
- developing a continuity of operations plan that identifies time critical/essential services and personnel

4. Workforce Management

- optimizing your organizational capacity to support the best possible public service delivery
- modernizing and redeploying resources to priority areas when or where they are needed

5. Data Collection

- improving how the agency uses data in decision-making, information-sharing and reporting, including by leveraging available or new data solutions to inform outcome-based reporting and improve service delivery
- supporting transparency and privacy requirements of data work and data sharing with the ministry, as appropriate.

6. Digital Delivery and Customer Service

- exploring and implementing digitization or digital modernization strategies for online service delivery and continuing to meet and exceed customer service standards through transition
- adopting digital approaches, such as user research, agile development and product management

7. Diversity and Inclusion

- developing and encouraging diversity and inclusion initiatives promoting an equitable, inclusive, accessible, anti-racist and diverse workplace
- demonstrating leadership of an inclusive environment free of harassment
- adopting an inclusion engagement process to ensure all voices are heard to inform policies and decision-making

8. COVID-19 Recovery

- identifying and pursuing service delivery methods (digital or other) that have evolved since the start of COVID-19
- supporting the recovery efforts from COVID-19

I thank you and your fellow board members for your continued support, and for your valuable contributions. Should you have any questions/concerns, please feel free to contact Paddy Buckley, Director of the Postsecondary Education Policy Branch, at Paddy.Buckley@ontario.ca.

Sincerely,

The Honourable Jill Dunlop
Minister of Colleges and Universities

c: Dr. Janice Deakin, President and Chief Executive Officer, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

Ari Laskin, Chief of Staff, Ministry of Colleges and Universities
Shelley Tapp, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Colleges and Universities