

Stakeholder Summary

New approach needed to achieve equitable access to PSE, report argues

A dramatic rise in enrolment at Ontario's colleges and universities over the past two decades has done little to achieve equitable access for those students who have been traditionally underrepresented in higher education, argues a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Decades of research has shown that first-generation students (those whose parents didn't complete postsecondary), low-income students, Indigenous students and students with disabilities are less likely to enrol in postsecondary education, and less likely to attain a PSE credential than their peers. Successive federal and provincial governments have sought to boost participation of underrepresented students by encouraging enrolment growth, expanding student financial assistance, capping tuition fees and providing targeted funding to institutions to recruit and support these students, the report notes.

These policies have resulted in an increase of 31% in enrolment to 725,000 students in 2015 from 555,000 in 2004 and have made Ontario a world leader in adult postsecondary attainment. About 68% of Ontarians between the ages of 25 and 34 have a postsecondary credential, the highest rate of any Canadian province and among the highest of the OECD countries.

Yet there is scant evidence that enrolment growth has reduced the participation gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students. And it has given rise to significant challenges for institutions and students alike. Changing provincial demographics, which show a decline in the number of domestic PSE-bound students, indicate that further growth may not be possible, putting pressure on the ability of institutions to increase revenues. In addition, the extreme and rapid growth in enrolment has not been accompanied by a commensurate increase in the number of faculty and other resources, and has led to suggestions that the quality of the student experience has diminished.

The report, *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education*, argues that a new approach to access is needed, one that focuses limited provincial resources on helping underrepresented students rather than continuing to expand overall enrolment. And it argues that truly effective access policies and interventions must be applied at the K-12 sector.

"Let's declare victory on growth, and now focus more intently on ensuring that all Ontarians have an equal opportunity to access and succeed in the province's postsecondary system," says the report.

Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education is written by Fiona Deller, Amy Kaufman and Rosanna Tamburri, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.