Report calls for new plan and objectives for Ontario's postsecondary online-learning initiatives

In setting future priorities for digital learning in the province's postsecondary system, the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities should develop a plan that sets out clear goals and objectives, and that identifies performance measures to monitor their progress, concludes a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

The Ministry of Colleges and Universities asked HEQCO in May 2019 to review the digital-learning initiatives and activities of the province's public postsecondary institutions, and provide insights into two government-funded agencies that are involved with online learning: Contact North and eCampusOntario.

The report concludes that the government should review the mandates and activities of the agencies, and amend or refocus their performance objectives to align clearly with the goals identified in the digital-learning plan. The government should also develop a set of metrics to assess its digital-learning objectives.

To conduct its review, HEQCO consulted several individuals, postsecondary institutions and organizations. Based on the advice it heard, HEQCO concluded that it is important for the government to maintain a presence and continue to fund activities in digital learning in order to promote the further development and expansion of online-learning opportunities in the province. However, the funding should steer institutions to advance the government's goals for the postsecondary sector, the report states.

Expanding access for students in northern, rural and remote Ontario communities through fully online programs and courses ought to remain a priority for government, according to the report. As well, the government should provide support services for these students. The report notes that this is the core of Contact North's traditional mandate, which the agency should continue to pursue. However, the report states that there may be opportunities to fine tune and refocus the agency's mandate on its core responsibilities. In addition, the government should examine and strengthen broadband service and internet connectivity to remote communities in the province that are currently underserviced.

Government funding provided through eCampusOntario for faculty training, pedagogical resources, course development and technology supports should be tied more explicitly to the government's broader goals of enhanced institutional collaboration and expanded credit transfer, the report adds.

In addition, the government should expand its data collection procedures to identify students who take digital courses or are provided services by provincial agencies in order to allow the evaluation of key outcomes such as graduation rates, skills acquisition and postgraduate employment.

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Government's Role in Digital Learning: Review and Recommendations for the Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities was written by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.