

Stakeholder Summary

First-generation students less likely to go to postsecondary, report finds

A sizeable gap exists between the PSE completion rate of first-generation students and those whose parents attained a postsecondary credential, despite years of government policies meant to improve access for these and other underrepresented students, finds a new report by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

Using a newly available data set, the researchers examined whether the longstanding gap in PSE attainment between first-generation students and their non-first-generation counterparts has changed as a result of government policies put in place to recruit and support these students. They found that an attainment gap of more than 20 percentage points exists between 25-to-34 year-old first-generation students — those from a family where neither parent completed PSE — and their counterparts from families where at least one parent attained a credential. The gap is virtually the same as that among older age cohorts. The attainment gap is the percentage point difference between the proportion of first-generation and non-first-generation students who completed PSE.

The report — *Parental Education and Postsecondary Attainment: Does the Apple Fall Far From the Tree?* — confirms previous research findings that parental education is an important determinant of educational attainment and carries more weight than other factors including family income.

The study also found that first-generation students are more than twice as likely to drop out of high school. However, those who do make it to postsecondary are more likely to complete a program. And once in the labour market, they earn similar incomes and are just as likely to have jobs with pensions, bonuses, managerial status and job permanence.

The findings indicate that the province's policies “have done little to close the PSE attainment gap between first-generation students and their peers, despite a generous financial aid system and the provision of targeted funding to institutions to recruit and support these students,” the report states.

The researchers argue that government resources aimed at supporting first-generation and other underrepresented students would be better spent in the K-12 sector. “Our analysis suggests that a first step to achieving equity of access is to get underrepresented students to complete high school,” they say. “Once in the system, they fare well.”

Parental Education and Postsecondary Attainment: Does the Apple Fall Far From the Tree? is written by Ken Chatoor, Emily MacKay and Lauren Hudak, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.