

PRIORITIES AND RESEARCH AGENDA FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY COUNCIL OF ONTARIO: A DISCUSSION PAPER

PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) is seeking comments on the priorities and research agenda it should adopt during its initial years of operation.

In recent years the Ontario government has made significant changes in its policy framework for postsecondary education. The creation of the Council is one of these changes. By statute, the Council is a Crown agency that is independent of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and of the universities, colleges and associations in the postsecondary education sector. Yet the Council can contribute to the improvement of postsecondary education in Ontario only through cooperation and collaboration across the sector. Such cooperation should have due regard for the autonomy that universities and colleges have established under current legislation and policies.

This paper provides some background on the Council's mandate and proposes some principles that should guide its research activities. It then suggests five possible roles for the Council and identifies some potential research priorities that relate to each role.

BACKGROUND: THE COUNCIL'S MANDATE

The *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act*¹ gives the Council a broad mandate to advise on improving all aspects of postsecondary education, including quality, access and accountability.

More specifically, Section 5 says the purpose of the Council is “to assist the Minister in improving all aspects of the postsecondary education sector, including improving the quality of education provided in the sector, access to postsecondary education and accountability of postsecondary educational institutions.”

Section 6 says “the functions of the Council are,

- (a) to develop and make recommendations to the Minister,

¹ *Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act, 2005*, S.O. 2005, c. 28, Sched. G.
http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/05h28_e.htm

(i) on *targets to be achieved* in improving the quality of post-secondary education, on the *methods* of achieving those targets and on the *time frame* for doing so, and

(ii) on *performance measures to be used* to evaluate the post-secondary education sector;

(b) to *evaluate the post-secondary education sector*, report to the Minister on the results of the evaluation and make the report available to the public;

(c) to *conduct research on all aspects of post-secondary education* with a view to helping the Council achieve its object, including research,

(i) on the development and design of *various models of post-secondary education*,

(ii) on the means of *encouraging collaboration* between various post-secondary educational institutions in general and in particular in matters relating to the recognition by such institutions of courses and programs of study provided at other such institutions, and

(iii) on other matters specified by the Minister; and

(d) to do such other things as may be prescribed by regulation.” (emphasis added)

In addition, the government has asked the Council to “monitor and make recommendations to the government on the new student access guarantee. The guarantee means no qualified Ontario student will be prevented from attending Ontario's public colleges and universities due to lack of financial support programs.”²

SOME PRINCIPLES

A number of principles may usefully guide the design of the Council's research program:

1. *The Council's research program should aim to increase the sum of knowledge available about Ontario's postsecondary education system.* The recent Ontario Postsecondary Review found that “[w]e simply don't know enough about how we're doing and how

² MTCU news release, May 15, 2006.

http://ogov.newswire.ca/ontario/GPOE/2006/05/15/c6264.html?lmatch=&lang=_e.html

others are doing.”³ The research program should build on established work, but synthesizing existing research will not be enough.

2. *The research program should aim to provide evidence that will be useful to the Council in fulfilling its mandate of advising the Minister on postsecondary education policy.* While many aspects of postsecondary education are worth studying for their own sake, policy relevance and importance will be useful criteria for determining which proposed research projects should have priority.
3. *The research program should support the Council’s work in both the short term and the long term.* The Council will be expected to provide advice every year. The research program needs to build for the long term while also seeking opportunities for short-term research that will advance the Council’s goals.
4. *The research program should be sensitive to the diversity in institutional missions and respectful of institutional autonomy.* There should be caution about any proposed research that is premised on applying a single measuring stick to all institutions.
5. *The research program should balance the costs and benefits of imposing new information-gathering requirements on postsecondary stakeholders.* Section 7 of the Act states that “[a] post-secondary educational institution shall provide the Council or a person designated by the Council with access to any information in its custody or control that the Council or person may require for the purpose of carrying out its object and functions.” Use of this power should balance the benefits of gathering new information with the costs that may be imposed on those who are asked to supply information.
6. *The research program should make good use of research conducted by other organizations.* Much good work is already in progress (or has already been completed) by MTCU, colleges, universities, ACAATO, COU, student associations, faculty associations, faculty with a research interest in higher education, research organizations funded by other ministries and other governments, and independent research organizations. The Council should coordinate its research program with others where this is feasible.
7. *The research program should be carried out principally through externally-contracted work, under the direction of researchers who are experts in postsecondary education policy and who are full-time employees of the Council.* The Council’s secretariat should resist the urge to hire a large pool of expert researchers who attempt to meet all of the Council’s research needs. Such a model will become stifling, and it will miss the opportunity to strengthen and expand the network of external researchers who specialize in higher education policy. Nevertheless, the Council, through its secretariat, must be a knowledgeable manager of research and must have the capacity to assess research results,

³ Honourable Bob Rae, *Ontario: A leader in learning* (Toronto: Queen’s Printer for Ontario, 2005), 15.

synthesize published research from a variety of sources and from other jurisdictions, develop policy options and background materials for the Council's consideration, and prepare well-considered and authoritative material for publication. This suggests the need for a small team of about 6-10 expert policy staff, supplemented by several other staff to support the board and handle administrative matters.

8. *The research program should be a model of collaboration and cooperation with other interested research organizations, in Ontario and in other jurisdictions.* While the Council is independent of government and of postsecondary education stakeholders, it will wish to work with government, stakeholders and other research organizations in seeking accurate and timely information that is pertinent to postsecondary education policy. Researchers from other jurisdictions may play a valuable role in providing new perspectives based on the experience of other postsecondary education systems.
9. *The research program should place a high value on transparency.* There should be a presumption that the topics of contracted research, and the results of such research, will be readily available to the public.
10. *The research program should incorporate a full and effective public communications plan.* The Council should sponsor a program of publications, workshops and conferences that will contribute to research in progress and will promote dissemination of research that has been completed.

POSSIBLE PRIORITIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE RESEARCH AGENDA

This section describes five ways that the Council could fulfill its mandate, and assesses some of the implications of each for the Council's research program. The list is not exhaustive, and the Council could choose to play several of these roles.

1. HEQCO as the leader in creating a quality assurance framework for postsecondary education

The Postsecondary Review urged the Council to lead the creation of "a new robust quality assurance framework" that would incorporate both provincial and institutional-level indicators. The framework was intended to serve as a basis for measuring and encouraging continuous improvement and for developing provincial policies that would support quality improvement. The Postsecondary Review cited with approval the conceptual framework on quality developed under the auspices of the Canadian Policy Research Network.

The Postsecondary Review foresaw that, “[t]he new [performance] measures – provincial and institution-level – would be incorporated in multi-year plans, and would be published, including on the proposed new provincial web portal.” As a result, there would be “[p]ublic reporting on sector, institutional and program-level quality and performance that provides meaningful information to help students make educational choices, and contributes to greater public confidence in higher education.”⁴

Such a quality assurance framework would provide a basis for assessing whether the quality of education at Ontario colleges and universities meets or exceeds the standards of other high-quality postsecondary education systems. The framework might also assist the Minister and postsecondary institutions in identifying areas for cooperative improvement.

A research program in this area would need to answer questions such as these:

- What information would be useful in developing a quality framework for postsecondary education? What existing data sources and surveys could be incorporated into the framework? What information is used by other jurisdictions, and with what degree of success?
- How can information be collected in a fair and timely manner?
- How can it be made available to its intended users in a useful format?
- How can it be made available in a way that encourages improvement and diversity rather than inappropriate comparison of institutions and programs with differing missions?

2. HEQCO as an advisor on system planning and interjurisdictional competitiveness

Future students, institutions and the public at large might benefit if the Council were to adopt a role in setting medium-term goals for the postsecondary education system and monitoring progress against the best public postsecondary education systems in other jurisdictions.

The Postsecondary Review urged that the Council should provide “advice on the evolution of the system,”⁵ and this recommendation is reflected in section 6 of the Act, as cited above.

⁴ Rae, 54-56. The CPRN framework was subsequently published as Ross Finnie and Alex Usher, “Measuring the quality of postsecondary education: Concepts, current practices and a strategic plan” (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, April 2005). <http://www.cprn.org/en/doc.cfm?doc=1208>

⁵ Rae, 15.

A research program in this area would need to answer questions such as these:

- How well is the postsecondary education system meeting the social and economic needs of the people of Ontario? How will these needs evolve over the next 10 years, and how should the postsecondary education system change to meet them?
- How does the performance of Ontario's postsecondary system compare with that of other jurisdictions with similar economies? In what ways is Ontario's system better? In what ways should Ontario aim to improve?
- Based on reasonable assumptions about demographics, participation rates, and length of students' programs, what enrolment levels should Ontario be planning for over the next 10 years? How high would enrolment levels be if Ontario were to adopt ambitious policies for expanding access?
- How will the student population 10 years from now differ from today? Will the demand grow for some programs or some services more quickly than for others? How should we address capacity constraints that would otherwise prevent these students from being served? What should be the relative roles of existing institutions, new campuses and/or new institutions in meeting the growth in demand?
- How will the recent expansion of university research, and the growing role of colleges in applied research, affect the quality of students' education? How do we continue to strengthen research programs so that research and postsecondary teaching complement one another?
- How should we link future growth with quality improvement? What are the best ways of ensuring that, as the system expands, its quality rises to meet or exceed the quality of postsecondary systems in other jurisdictions?

3. HEQCO as a monitor of accessibility

Prospective students, parents and the public at large may see the Council as a monitor of whether qualified students from all backgrounds and locations have fair access to a postsecondary education. The Minister has asked the Council to monitor and make recommendations on the Student Access Guarantee.

The government has made specific efforts to increase opportunities for Aboriginal students, francophone students, students from low-income backgrounds, students who have disabilities, and students who are the first generation in their families to attend college or university. Assessing how best to increase opportunities for students is made more complex by the federal-provincial-institutional sharing of responsibilities for assisting low-income students and by the recognition that finances are not the sole barrier to fair access.

Access also depends on the capacity of the postsecondary education system to serve all qualified students who wish to attend. Capacity is reflected in the availability and quality of physical space, instruction, student services, learning resources, and other resources that institutions must supply in order to provide a high-quality education.

A research program in this area would need to answer questions such as these:

- What are the best ways of defining access? Should access be defined in terms of admissions, progression to upper years, and graduation? Should the definition of access take into account differences in students' ability to fully participate in postsecondary education – such as differences in time available to engage in learning activities outside the classroom? Should access be defined and measured the same way for every postsecondary program?
- Is there evidence that capacity constraints are limiting, or will limit, the postsecondary education system's ability to admit all qualified students?
- What evidence exists about trends in access to postsecondary education for the groups that the government has identified? Are there other groups that require special attention?
- Which policies are most effective in ensuring fair access for students from all backgrounds? Are there ineffective policies that should be changed?

4. HEQCO as encouragement for inter-institutional transfer

Future students who wish to transfer from one institution to another may value research and policy advice from the Council on ways to encourage inter-institutional transfer.

The Postsecondary Review found that, despite some progress, “nowhere near enough progress has been made... [in establishing] clear and transparent equivalency standards so that there is recognition for what each student has accomplished.”⁶

The College-University Consortium for Cooperation was established in 1996 “to facilitate, promote and coordinate joint education and training ventures that will: aid the transfer of students from sector to sector; facilitate the creation of joint programs between colleges and universities; and, further the development of a more seamless continuum of postsecondary education in Ontario.”⁷ This work takes place within Ontario's existing policy framework. There is no need for the Council to duplicate these efforts. The legislation establishing the Council asks it to conduct research on the means of encouraging collaboration, with a view to making policy recommendations.

⁶ Rae, 14.

⁷ <http://cucc.cou.on.ca/>

A research program in this area would need to answer questions such as these:

- How much progress has been made in facilitating transfer? What measures exist of student demand? How much of that demand is being fully satisfied, partly satisfied (e.g. through partial credit transfer), or not satisfied at all? Is there hidden demand from students who would like to transfer but believe it is not possible to do so?
- To the extent that institutions may disagree about whether a student is qualified to transfer, how can these differences be bridged?
- Are there high-quality postsecondary education systems in other jurisdictions that could serve as models of how credit transfer might be enhanced in Ontario?

5. HEQCO as a monitor of effective institutional governance and autonomy

Institutions that advocate institutional autonomy as an alternative to one-size-fits-all measures of quality may wish to see the Council adopt a role in promoting institutional self-governance and monitoring its effectiveness in providing high-quality education.

Many universities and colleges have advocated institutional autonomy in a competitive environment as the best way to ensure that students have access to a diverse range of high-quality programs.

Several advisory reports over the past two decades have drawn attention to institutional governance processes as a vehicle for promoting quality and accountability. The Postsecondary Review argued that government demands for accountability should respect the value of institutional self-government and flexibility. The Task Force on University Accountability proposed that, in lieu of a central body that would establish norms and rankings of performance applicable to every institution, each governing body should adopt a set of management indicators appropriate to its own institution and should vigorously monitor the institution's progress. The Task Force further recommended that there should be an independent committee to monitor and report on the effectiveness of each institution's accountability framework.⁸

Any research and policy development in this area would need to recognize that colleges and universities operate under different legislative and governance frameworks, and that there

⁸ Rae, 16; Task Force on University Accountability, *University accountability: A strengthened framework* [William H. Broadhurst report] (Toronto, 1993), 54, 72-76. See also Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education, *Excellence, Accessibility, Responsibility* [David C. Smith report] (Toronto, 1996), 3; and Investing in Students Task Force, *Portals and Pathways* [Jalynn Bennett report] (Toronto, 2001), 63-66.

have been significant changes in their accountability relationships with government in recent years.

A research program in this area would need to answer questions such as these:

- How effective are institutional governance processes in Ontario relative to those in other jurisdictions? What effect, if any, do differences in statutory responsibilities, regulatory practices and governance processes have on the quality of students' education?
- What evidence is there to support the effectiveness of current regulatory measures in improving quality? Would a more focused regulatory framework, placing more responsibility on boards, achieve better results for students? What kind of monitoring or measurement system would best ensure accountability to the public for the results that are being achieved?

NEXT STEPS

The Council's success and ultimate effectiveness depend in part on the willingness of interested groups and individuals across the postsecondary sector to participate in its work. The Council is seeking the comments of all postsecondary stakeholders on its priorities and research agenda for its initial years of operation. In particular:

1. Is there broad agreement on the principles enumerated in this paper? Are there other important principles that should be added?
2. Do the five ways that the Council might fulfill its mandate, as described in this paper, embrace all of the functions that the Council might reasonably undertake? Are there others that should be added?
3. What priority should the Council assign to each of these five functions? What percentage of its time and effort should the Council devote to each function during its initial years?
4. Do the research questions enumerated in this paper provide an adequate overview of the research issues that the Council should address? Are there other questions of comparable or greater importance that should be added?

The Council would be grateful to receive written responses by September 29, 2006. These may be addressed to:

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Based on these responses, the Council proposes to host a series of follow-up meetings organized around critical issues that warrant further exploration and debate. Suggestions on the structure and format of these meetings are welcome. The structure and format will be determined and made public after written responses are received.