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Stakeholder summary

Differentiation: Toward a more coherent and sustainable university system

A new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) finds that the province's 20 universities could be organized into at least three distinct clusters based on a set of variables that other jurisdictions have used to differentiate their university systems, setting the stage for a more coherent, diversified and sustainable system. But for this differentiation framework to be effective, the roles, rights and responsibilities of universities in each of the clusters needs to be identified and the government would need to align those decisions to funding.

 "These conversations and decisions are meaningful, worthwhile and effective only if they are tied to funding formulas, which represents the most powerful levers available to government to effect change," says HEQCO. "As individual institutions consider how these decisions intersect with their plans and aspirations, these debates are typically controversial, but they are critical if the benefits of a more differentiated Ontario university system are to be derived and enjoyed by students, the public and the province."

Project description

Previous HEQCO reports, especially a report from an expert panel that assessed the strategic mandate agreement submissions of Ontario universities, laid out the arguments for and benefits of a more differentiated Ontario postsecondary system. The government has indicated that it wishes to pursue a policy of greater institutional differentiation. This report examines the diversity of Ontario's universities (a college analysis is forthcoming) on variables that other jurisdictions have used to differentiate the universities within their systems. For this study, the report considers data on enrolment, number of PhDs awarded, percentage of doctoral degrees awarded, sponsored research income, faculty publications, research citations and H-index scores, which factor in both the number of research publications by faculty member and frequency of citation.

Findings

The data suggest that the University of Toronto could be considered to be in a cluster of its own, competitive with some of the world's most highly ranked universities. At the upper end of research intensity are the other five Ontario universities in the so-called U-15, representing Canada's most research-intensive universities: McMaster, Western, Ottawa, Waterloo and Queen's, as well as the University of Guelph.

Within a cluster of mainly undergraduate universities in the Ontario system are Algoma, Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU), Nipissing, University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), Laurier, Trent, Brock, Lakehead and Laurentian. These institutions are less involved in graduate education, especially at the PhD level and attract a lower level of research income. Two of the

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institutions – UOIT and OCADU -- have highly defined mandates. In such cases, other jurisdictions sometimes include a category of "special purpose universities" in their differentiation frameworks.

The report notes that four universities – York, Carleton, Windsor and Ryerson – fall between the more research intensive and mainly undergraduate clusters.

Although used in other jurisdictions, there are two other common dimensions of differentiation that are absent in the Ontario system. No Ontario university presents itself as primarily undergraduate liberal arts nor as an online or "open" university. Virtually all of Ontario's universities characterize themselves, and aspire to be, research intensive. And although there has been discussion about online institutions for some years, none promote internet-based instruction to the degree and breadth of acknowledged online institutions. "While Ontario universities differ in size, research profile and participation in graduate studies," according to the report, "all of them, regardless of the details of their current state and makeup, appear to aspire to the same goal: specifically, to grow discovery research programs and expand graduate studies."

Policy considerations

With the implementation of a differentiation framework, universities use their own resources more purposefully and students have clear choices about which institutions best serve their personal and professional goals. "This is how the quality of the overall system is uplifted and it is what the best differentiation frameworks enable.   The role of data is to provide the hard facts about the current activities of Ontario's universities to inform the development of a sensible differentiation framework," says HEQCO.

The authors note that the proposed differentiation scheme poses questions for government. Among them, should the four universities that do not readily align with the "more research intensive" and "mainly undergraduate" clusters be placed in a separate category? Should PhD seats be preferentially allocated to the more research intensive universities and to what degree? Should government attempt to minimize PhD programs in mainly undergraduate universities? How should the funding of master's programs, especially professional and course-based master's programs, be allocated across the clusters?

While a differentiation framework defines differences among institutions, it does not signal differing merit, value or worth, say the authors. And rather than concentrating on what a university should not do, a useful framework enables institutions to do even more of what they do best.

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