



Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario

Data Infrastructure for Studying Equity of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario Appendix

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Published by

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

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Cite this publication in the following format:

Gallagher-Mackay, K. (2017) *Data Infrastructure for Studying Equity of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario Appendix*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.



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Appendix 1: Key findings from the Youth in Transition Survey

There were a number of findings from YITS that have made a significant difference for policy. The highlights include:

- Family educational background has a relatively stronger influence on postsecondary access and persistence than family income (Finnie & Mueller, 2008; Mueller, 2008).
- Analyses of pathways across the postsecondary sector showed completion rates that are extremely high compared to American institutions and highlighted patterns of movement between and across institutions affecting a significant number of students (Finnie, Childs, & Martinello, 2014).
- Comparative research — both interprovincial and international — based on YITS pointed towards the relatively limited impact of tuition changes on postsecondary access and raised questions about the impact of student financial assistance in affecting the rates at which low-income students access postsecondary (Belley, Frenette, & Lochner, 2011; Johnson, 2008).
- Second chance programs supporting students who initially dropped out significantly increased overall rates of high school completion and postsecondary enrollment (2010).
- Sector-wide analyses in the health field described students' pathways into related professions and career pathways, supporting human resource planning in a largely publicly funded sector and identifying key decision-making points starting in high school (Vaillancourt, Plante, Allen, Ceolin, & Ouellette, 2007).
- YITS data, integrated with data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), demonstrated a relationship between relatively early student achievement patterns related to later postsecondary and workforce pathways, and supported more detailed analyses by certain subgroups (Hango, 2013; Knighton & Bussiere, 2006; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development & Programme for International Student Assessment, 2010). One interesting study of Indigenous youth showed students' standardized test scores on PISA were higher than students' grades, and that while achievement was a critical factor for both, socio-economic status appeared to have a greater impact on students' access to PSE than on high school completion (Frenette, 2011).
- Somewhat unexpectedly in light of international data, YITS showed that both first- and second-generation immigrant students were more likely to access postsecondary education and persist there than Canadian-born children. Regression analysis suggested that immigrant children benefit from higher levels of parental education (including international education), but also that the overall rates of access are significantly driven by relatively high rates of attendance by immigrant students who “possess characteristics usually viewed as disadvantageous,” including low parental education, low incomes, and relatively low academic achievement. The authors suggest that this finding pointed to the importance of a clearer understanding of culture as a determinant of access and persistence (S. Childs et al., 2012; Finnie, 2012).

Appendix 2: Research priorities for understanding influences on postsecondary access

A research base for equity of access to postsecondary education supports policy makers developing informed theories of action about what will push the levers to improve access and persistence. This necessarily entails a focus not just on who is going where, but also an understanding of what influences shape students' trajectories. Informants shared their sense of the following priority areas for research in this field.

1. Family background

Probably the most central finding in the literature on equity of access to postsecondary education is the significance of students' socio-economic status as a driver of enrollment. It is clear at this point that family educational background is the most significant factor, having a greater impact than family income (Finnie & Mueller, 2008; Mueller, 2008). It is also clear that the operation of these factors varies across cultural groups (S. Childs et al., 2012; Finnie, 2012). But while we have good data on the existence of these patterns, we still have a limited understanding of how to disrupt them: What happens in the homes of immigrant students with low-income, low-education parents who are so much more likely to go onto postsecondary than children of Canadian-born parents in the same circumstances? In Indigenous families where there have often been very harmful educational experiences, such as being forced to leave home communities for education or placement in residential schools, what needs to happen for educational success to be seen as a realistic and useful tool for creating opportunities? Among rural students, are low PSE-attendance rates more an issue of affordability, since living at home while studying may not be an option, or attitudes (is PSE perceived as not particularly relevant or useful)? How, why and when do parents' expectations about PSE change over time? In-depth data on these sub-issues combined with administrative data to track outcomes over time are the most likely and cost-effective way to develop a stronger understanding of these fundamental dynamics affecting PSE outcomes.

Many of my informants argued that the fundamental decisions about PSE access happen much younger than current policy and program efforts would suggest and through more subtle processes. One person who works in a college reflected: "When we think about recruiting to potential students — or creating pathways or areas of interest — we typically go to high school students. But have they already made their decisions? Have parental notions of PSE already permeated their thinking to the point our outreach is not as effective?" Another asked, "When did you know you were going to university? What made it seem real to you?" A person with an extensive background running access programs talked about the need to "reach families where kids are very young and somehow communicate that some form of PSE is a necessity, your kids belong there, and there will be supports for them there."

Where data is available, they suggest that high school parents' and students' expectations for going on to postsecondary education are higher than the percentage of students who do proceed; better understanding that gap, demographic differences in parental expectations, and supports that might help close it are clearly an important part of the access agenda.

2. Neighbourhood influences

A number of informants emphasized the importance of neighbourhood-level data for understanding policy influences and supporting community-based research on interventions. A focus on particular neighbourhoods with relatively low levels of PSE attendance allows a clearer understanding of the intersecting environmental factors that may affect students' attitudes, preparation and resources.

Availability of local data is likely to be particularly useful for community-based research. For example, the OMEGA Foundation has a program called SmartSAVER to help low-income families access Canada Learning Bonds, a \$500 grant provided to families that open Registered Education Savings Plans for their children. SmartSAVER uses community-level data available through the Canada Student Loans Program to identify the number of families eligible for Canada Learning Bonds in each Forward Sortation Area (based on the first three digits of the postal code) and shares that information with its community partners — anti-poverty organizations, settlement agencies and other groups. Quarterly data updates from the Canada Student Loans Program allow them to track the number of families who had taken advantage of the government subsidies, providing an indirect but meaningful outcome measure for the different outreach activities and information sessions that it has offered. According to the foundation's director, the data "became a rallying point for community players, who would say, 'What! There are 400 kids in our neighbourhood who could get the learning bonds? That is something to shoot for.' We could communicate the immensity of this opportunity."

Neighbourhood data are essential but not sufficient. While neighbourhood data, particularly in the hands of activist organizations, can help provide an enriched picture of student context, almost the only student income data that is currently available is at the neighbourhood level. Interaction between neighbourhood and individual or family level factors is another important issue that requires both types of data.

3. K-12 programs and practices

Alongside family and community influences, there is a need for a better understanding of the work of K-12 schools, specifically in addressing questions of postsecondary access and success. Schools have a critical role to play in improving access both by ensuring students, particularly marginalized students, are academically prepared for postsecondary. They also have a key role to play in shaping students' and families' attitudes and expectations about the role of postsecondary in their future.

Administrative and data silos have a significant impact here. If schools' operational definition of success is test scores and graduation rates and there is limited data available about students' post-graduation outcomes, these silos are reinforced. Perhaps the most critical issue right now is that while the OEN is attached to data at both the K-12 and postsecondary data level, there are very limited linkages in these data sets.

Informants identified a number of aspects of K-12 that they considered worthy of research. Some but not all of these data questions could be answered through administrative data alone; others would benefit from the ability to either measure certain phenomena at a point in time — or do experiments and use administrative data to trace impact (or lack of impact) over time.

3.1 School culture and environment

A number of my informants from the K-12 system expressed serious questions about how and whether cultures in secondary schools actively promote postsecondary education as an option for most if not all students. In K-12 policy documents, there is almost no mention of postsecondary as an outcome of secondary school (Robson, Anisef, Newton, & Teclé, 2015) and several informants talked about schools being neutral about students' choice of pathways, rather than promoting college or university. In the United States, having "college and career-ready graduates" has been a widely established outcome of the K-12 system and there has been a growing body of research that has demonstrated that schools with "college-going cultures" have a significant, positive impact on the number of students — particularly low-income and marginalized students — who apply to and choose to attend two or four-year college programs (for example, Nagaoka et al., 2009).

3.2 Parental and community involvement programs

Programs promoting parental involvement have been identified as an important part of the education system, with considerable potential to boost student achievement, an important predictor of PSE access (Epstein, 2011; Perna & Titus, 2005). There is considerable variability in parental involvement across schools, and in secondary school in particular. One informant, with a strong focus on equity issues, pointed to limited research on the impact of different parent involvement strategies within schools at different grade levels as a promising tool to address PSE access by helping parents understand options for postsecondary education, the supports available, and the importance of their own expectations.

3.3 Guidance and career planning

There is an extensive new curriculum to support students' career planning and decision-making, *Creating Pathways to Success*. The curriculum is inquiry-based and defines success holistically and not only in terms of educational and career outcomes. It envisions all students will leave school with a "clear plan for their initial postsecondary destination, whether in apprenticeship training, college, community living, university, or the workplace." There is a mandatory Careers half-credit course in secondary schools. From Grade 10 onward, students are expected to write down their career choices and develop a plan to achieve them; schools are required to provide information and learning experiences about postsecondary options, including education, and to support students learning about available financing (Ministry of Education, 2013a). There is little research on how this PSE-neutral curriculum is implemented in different contexts or the impact of different approaches.

Informants identified a range of data needs around guidance counselling services and supports. These questions ranged from whether the ratio of students to guidance staff made a difference for PSE outcomes, to guidance counsellors' knowledge of and attitudes toward different PSE options. This research would obviously have greater impact if it was tied to longitudinal data about postsecondary application rates and patterns of students.

Research has focused, instead, on external interventions, particularly community-based interventions, targeted to promote postsecondary enrolment. As noted above, there is experimental research about specialized programs that actively promote PSE, which suggest positive outcomes for students applying to and enrolling in PSE programs (Ford & Kwakye, 2016; Ford & Oreopoulos, 2016). There are a number of American initiatives that provide personalized information about postsecondary programs and support in applying for college and for financial aid, which have had dramatic positive impacts. One example is the Americorps College Possible program, which boosted the rates of low-income students attending postsecondary by 15% (Avery, 2013). Personalized college counselling and academic support is also one key element of the Pathways to Education model, a program which has been demonstrated to boost both graduation rates and postsecondary enrolment compared to other communities served by public housing over the same time period (Lavecchia, Oreopoulos, & Brown, 2015).

3.4 Targeted interventions: Student success initiatives

The Government of Ontario has adopted a multi-pronged strategy to promote student success, particularly for students who might otherwise have struggled. These strategies include dedicated student success personnel, credit recovery and rescue programs, dual-credit programs, which allow students to earn college or university credits while still in high school, and specialist high skills major programs that allow students to focus in-depth on an area of interest with possible career linkages (see Zegarac & Franz, 2007). While these strategies have been subject to evaluation (Ungerleider, 2008), and presumably there is a connection between higher graduation rates and higher PSE access, there is no data to look at the impact of these programs on postsecondary access or persistence.

4. College application process

Clearly a key area for studying equity of postsecondary access is understanding how students engage with — or are engaged by — the college application process. Colleges and universities do considerable research to understand students' profiles, motivations and decision-making at the application stage. Nevertheless, there are significant areas for expanding research in terms of understanding how different groups of students make decisions about whether to apply for postsecondary education and where to apply.

5. Student decision-making

Several researchers and administrators articulated the view that we still have a limited understanding of what shapes students' ultimate decisions about whether and where to apply to postsecondary. Students' choices about where to go can tend to reflect aspects of their social background. Students with less social capital — for example, first-generation students — may choose institutions that they perceive as being more accessible; low-income students are far more likely to choose their local institution to reduce costs by living at home.

One informant thought that in addition to thinking about institutions of choice, access research should also seek to better understand the impact of a proliferation of highly specialized programs (mostly in universities). Many of these are designed specifically to appeal to students (or their parents) on the basis of a perceived closer connection to possible employment. Are these programs motivating more students to

enroll? Who are the students choosing these options? Are students more likely to change programs if they start — at 18 — in a relatively narrow program? Are they finding employment in fields related to their specialization?

6. Decision-making by institutions

One informant argued that it is particularly critical to be able to understand whether the issue of access reflects a question about the pool of applicants or about the filtering process of the institutions. “From an access perspective, we should know about the people applying and about the people who get in — those aren’t the same groups. Not everyone who applies gets in. We need to know the demographics of applicants and those who are successful.” These data are important in assessing different approaches to the problem. Is a key challenge for institutions to attract students of diverse backgrounds, is it to ensure that they are prepared, or are there issues with the criteria and processes used by institutions to evaluate potential applicants? If there are particular criteria that are creating obstacles, perhaps they should be reconsidered. Describing it as “the question universities don’t want to ask,” the informant wondered the extent to which marks in a certain range actually predict success. Is there a difference between an 80 and a 95 in predicting positive outcomes in a program of study? One might ask, within the range of students likely to experience comparable success in a program, should equity factors be a more explicit consideration?

7. Cost of postsecondary

A number of informants talked about the need for a more accurate understanding of the full cost of postsecondary and student perceptions of that cost. In one case, an informant argued that widely-accepted numbers of the cost of postsecondary are often circulated by banks promoting educational savings programs or by student associations, both of which have reasons to inflate estimates. That informant argued that there are, in essence, multiple cost models and that the cost of postsecondary, particularly for those students who remain living at home (approximately 40% of students), is considerably lower than estimates exceeding \$100,000. To the extent that cost is a barrier, he argued, it is important to have a realistic estimate in mind. He suggested this was an important area for survey research. Research on providing students with net-tuition figures similarly emphasizes the importance of ensuring students are not basing their decisions about affordability on a gross overestimate of the cost of tuition, net of available grants (see for example, Hicks & Jonker, 2016).

Others emphasized how cost models based on students going straight from high school to postsecondary, without dependents, likely underestimate the true cost of postsecondary. For older students, in particular, postsecondary is more often assessed in terms of a mix of direct and opportunity costs associated with forgone employment — contributing to a preference for shorter programs (even if the longer-term financial benefits might be less). Students from disadvantaged groups are more likely to be older when attending postsecondary. A better understanding of the factors that help tip the balance toward PSE, and between institution/sector, is an important part of designing support programs for this group.

7.1 Student financial assistance

Right now, the Ontario Student Assistance Program is not attached to the Ontario Education Number, so the detailed financial data collected as part of OSAP cannot be used to examine the impact of access policies or practices on low-income students, or the extent to which student financial aid is providing support to (or burdening) low-income students. There is a strong basis of research that happens within the program, but it is difficult for researchers to obtain even fairly basic information (like what percentage of Ontario students in postsecondary education are currently accessing student financial assistance and average levels of indebtedness by family income). There appears to be a significant difference between the figures on student loan take-up and amounts in national surveys; one government informant told me the rate of OSAP use was 60%, considerably higher than Statistics Canada figures from approximately a decade ago suggesting that about a third of students had used student loans (Barr-Telford et al., 2003; Finnie & Laporte, 2007).

Research has clearly shown that lower-income students are more likely to need to borrow, but there remains limited research around the extent and impact of debt aversion as a factor affecting postsecondary access. In-depth longitudinal surveys or other studies of marginalized students should most certainly investigate these issues of knowledge and attitudes about student financing options. We also have limited information about the extent to which debt aversion is a reasonable fear, particularly for low-income or marginalized students. OSAP certainly tracks loan default rates, which are reported at the institutional level,¹ but there is little public analysis using that data. And there is little public information about whether loan default rates vary by family income level, program or institution.

Many institutions have invested significantly in grants, scholarships and bursaries, including those targeted at marginalized students. Informants identified a number of policy and program design issues around these forms of financial support:

- The extent to which these funds are actually reaching the students for whom they are intended (for example, one informant mentioned a report by the Western Canadian Deans about significant amounts of unclaimed bursary and scholarship funds). This research should consider barriers to accessing these potential supports, such as personalized assistance with applications that help students overcome those barriers;
- The extent to which the balance between bursaries and scholarships has a positive or negative effect on the proportion of funding going to lower-income and marginalized students;
- The extent to which these forms of non-debt assistance contribute to higher persistence and better outcomes for marginalized students, or whether there are ways of improving their contribution to these outcomes (for example, Pathways to Education provides grants conditional on program participation).

¹ See <https://osap.gov.on.ca/OSAPPortal/en/PlanYourEducation/ChooseaCareerSchoolProgram/PRDR015122.html>.

8. Scope and impact of access programs

The range of programs in place across Ontario that can be considered access programs is very substantial and range from targeted advertising to revising admissions requirements, programs of pre-assessment and remedial courses. This is an important policy area, where there is considerable work underway. To date, there has been limited Ontario research — at the program, institutional or sector level — about the impact of all these efforts (see Doran et al., 2015; Stonefish et al., 2015).

For an agenda around equity of access, this is clearly a research priority. Much of the research that does exist is maintained within individual institutions and does not necessarily inform public policy more broadly. And informants point to a number of key challenges in building a broader set of findings about effective access programs, not least among them, the multiple and overlapping range of programs and initiatives. As one person involved in the sector commented:

If you wanted to find out now how many university bridging and access programs there are in Ontario, you'd have to figure it out. You'd have to get on every website, and hope that the way it was displayed on [the] website hit your search. The programs are done differently in different places. And if you wanted to say how successful they are — again, you'd have to go program-by-program and hope that people are keeping meaningful data themselves.

At the same time, with a decentralized approach to measuring success, where individual programs use easily available measures such as enrollment, program completion, or even graduation from the institution hosting the transition program, the success of these programs may be underestimated. Access to broader administrative data might allow programs to measure highly relevant outcomes such as whether a student actually got a diploma or degree somewhere. Tax data could also allow an understanding of whether transition-year program participants who re-enter the job market get a boost, since they are seen not as high school dropouts but as someone who has taken a break from a university or college education. Others pointed to more short-term but significant measures. One informant talked about the success of a program that placed all applicants — not just those who were successful in obtaining one of a limited number of spots — in some kind of program that allowed them to continue their education based on the assumption their application meant they were ready and motivated for PSE: “We had to walk them across the hall to the next opportunity, person to person, so they could find something to be successful.”

Several informants also identified the highly contextualized nature of some of the programs they considered most successful, noting “it’s not one-size-fits-all.” From a program evaluation perspective, researchers have pointed to the need to make the assumptions behind some of these strategies explicit (R. A. Childs, Hanson, Carnegie-Douglas, & Archbold, 2016) both for the purposes of opening those assumptions to scrutiny and for designing better evaluations.

9. Delayed entry

The YITS survey demonstrated that second-chance programs provide a meaningful bridge to access and success for a significant number of students who did not, for various reasons, complete high school. Second-chance programs range from adult-education programs offered by school boards (for free) to transition-year

and bridging programs offered by postsecondary educational institutions. The Statistics Canada data did not, however, track the demographics of the students who were making use of them, or provide particular information on the circumstances that caused students to take the step of going back to postsecondary education.

It is widely recognized by those in the field that those who do not take a direct route into postsecondary are much more likely to belong to marginalized groups; support for older students is, in fact, a way of increasing other kinds of desired diversity on campus. For example, a representative of an Indigenous education group argued that many Indigenous students access postsecondary when they are older: “They tend not to go right in after high school, even the high school grads are older. So you have students in their 20s and 30s who get into college and work through system. Future doctors go into the Native Nursing Program, then we have women in their 40s and 50s [who] decide to go into medicine.” She argued that postsecondary institutions needed to have “a shift in mindset” to be more open to supporting mature students with families to provide effective access. Another informant talked about the need not only to provide financial and program supports for students with “the baggage of a spouse and/or children,” but to reconsider certain aspects of program design. That person pointed to the relatively high take-up of shorter and more vocation-centered private career college programs by older students funded through workplace retraining grants.

10. Scope and impact of academic and social support programs post-enrollment

There is extensive literature around academic and student support programs in postsecondary, and a full discussion of the issues is beyond the scope of this paper (for a recent contribution, see for example, Strange & Cox, 2016). Human rights law has played an acknowledged role in the development of certain critical supports, particularly services for students with disabilities and other special education needs (Poskitt & Wojda, 2015). There are active networks of those who work in the burgeoning subfield of diversity and accessibility services in postsecondary education.

From a data perspective, many of the same challenges face those trying to develop a research base on the effectiveness of academic and social support programs as those who research access programs designed to get students in the door. At this point, there is not even a comprehensive list or even typology of the types of programs intended to provide support for marginalized students on campuses across Ontario. The range of programs makes comparative study of the impact of these programs challenging as well — from ensuring faculty have the expertise to consistently provide accessible materials, tutoring and study skills sessions, to creating Indigenous cultural centres on campus. Initiatives with similar names may work very differently in different institutions and be subject to considerable variations in quality. Some programs may be shown to be effective in certain circumstances, but only in combination with others.

Perhaps more generally, success for students who have been historically excluded or ill-served by postsecondary institutions requires a framework for monitoring and acting upon information about how the institution, overall, is doing in meeting these students’ needs. This inquiry is as much about teaching and learning across the college or university as it is about targeted supports. The scope of this challenge goes far beyond collecting and sharing outcome data — even good quality, comparable data with appropriate demographic information — about specific programs targeting the needs of particular groups. Instead, it raises questions of how universities integrate goals around access, inclusion and diversity in their core

functioning (see for example, Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown, & Bartee, 2005; Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005).

11. Students' movement between institutions

The Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development has been using OEN data to track student movement between institutions, an issue of considerable policy interest. First, it suggests that sector-level PSE persistence rates are much higher than individual institutional rates (see also, Finnie et al., 2014). Second, there is a clear public interest in ensuring that students are receiving credit for learning — wherever it takes place — thus reducing waste in terms of students' time and public resources. The topic is important from an equity of access perspective as well. Research elsewhere suggests lower-income, Indigenous and rural students are more likely to begin PSE in college; to the extent that, as well as being an end in itself, college is also a pathway to university, it has the potential to increase social mobility. Also, the same research shows a significant number of students are also moving from university to college, finding a different route for success (Beatty-Guenter, 2015). A vice president research at a college with a close working relationship with its local university described the overall picture as “swirling,” and described the importance for both institutions “to offer as many pathways and choices to students as we can. There are advantages to students to moving in both directions — to get theoretical, hands-on experience and improve career prospects.” The system-wide equity impacts of “swirling” are not well-studied, but have the potential to be significant. Accessible, comparable, compatible data — at the institution and program level, with demographic information attached — is a prerequisite for understanding that issue at scale.

12. Data on the impacts of PSE on employment and social mobility

A full discussion of the impact of PSE on earnings and employment prospects is beyond the scope of this paper. But it must be noted that many of those I spoke to in conducting this research felt that these data are an important part of understanding the effectiveness of policies promoting equity of access to PSE. As one informant commented, “They say 70% of the jobs of the future will require some kind of postsecondary education. In fact, it is 100% of any meaningful jobs or engagement in the so-called highly skilled workforce.” While the economic outcomes of PSE — both at the individual and the societal level — is an extremely broad topic, the connection between equity of access to PSE and social mobility does raise some distinct issues.

One or two skeptics wondered if the push toward broader and broader postsecondary participation was, in fact, introducing new barriers to employment. One questioned, for example, the now common practice of employers such as the Canada Border Services Agency or Correctional Services Canada requiring applicants to have a university degree, or expectations that hairstylists will have attended fairly lengthy postsecondary programs. However, most of the informants (in this highly biased sample) operated on the assumption that PSE was likely to provide not just positive experiences, but a considerable boost to earnings. From a critical perspective, concerns about stratification are partly due to the varying returns on different sorts of institutional programs — earnings for university graduates are consistently higher than those of college graduates, which in turn are higher than those of private career colleges. There are differences within programs and across institutions as well. As we've seen, the extent to which graduates obtain employment and the level of their earnings can now be determined by using administrative data including tax linkages.

Surveys may still be required to assess whether program leavers or graduates are working in fields connected to their areas of study and their satisfaction with the PSE experience. To describe these employment/earnings data as “outcomes” of PSE is somewhat unfair. There is considerable evidence, for example, that discrimination is more rampant in the workforce than in public institutions of learning, and local employment markets also vary considerably. Nevertheless, this information appears to be highly salient to students deciding whether PSE is worth it. There is a very real possibility that, in the absence of public efforts to present contextualized data about these outcomes, other entities (Maclean’s Magazine or the Fraser Institute, for example) will produce a boiled down version for public consumption.



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