

## Stakeholder summary

### Ontario's Top High School Students Plan Early for Postsecondary Education

The top students in Ontario secondary schools begin planning for postsecondary education (PSE) earlier than their classmates and are drawn to science and engineering over business and the arts according to a new report by the **Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)**.

#### Project Description

*A Report on the Postsecondary Decisions of High-Achieving Students in Ontario* examines the PSE decisions of students whose grade point average places them in the top 1-5% of all university applicants. The study used application and admissions data from the Ontario Universities' Application Centre for all high school students in Ontario who applied to university between fall 1994 and 2008. While high-achieving students also attend college, for the purposes of this report only application and admissions data for university were available.

Interviews were also conducted with public school guidance counsellors and independent school placement and university admissions advisors, as well as scholarship program directors, alumni interview advisors for Ivy League and British universities, faculty who teach first-year students in certain highly selective programs and faculty who research issues of college choice and education.

#### Findings

High-achieving students plan earlier for PSE and most view it as a given in their life plans. Consistent with previous HEQCO research, parents with PSE credentials and parents of recent immigrants were significant influencers on PSE decisions. Top students were more likely to register in science and engineering programs than the general student population and less likely to register in business, and especially the arts. For example, approximately 10% of all students enrol in engineering, but between 20 and 40% of the very highest achievers (grade point averages in the top 1%) were registered in engineering.

Eighty percent of the highest-achieving students enrolled in an Ontario university in 2008, down by 6 percentage points since 1994, and the students tend to be clustered among only five institutions. According to the counsellors and advisors, many top students cited the desire to attend an elite, prestigious institution and felt few Ontario or Canadian institutions met that standard. However, those who did register in Ontario universities wanted a unique educational experience and sought out programs with smaller class sizes, more contact with faculty, innovative teaching strategies and interdisciplinary approaches. During the interviews, many counsellors and advisors noted the limited number of such program options in Ontario.

The top-achieving students were relatively evenly distributed across Ontario. More than three quarters of high schools graduate at least one student in the top 5% in a given year and fewer than 25 schools graduate more than ten. These students tend to take rigorous and demanding

secondary programs when offered, such as Advanced Placement courses, which are particularly useful for pursuing admission at top American institutions.

While high-achieving students were found in both public and independent secondary schools, the university preparation they receive differed significantly.. Students in independent schools received more coaching in how to fill out applications, including those for institutions outside of Ontario or Canada, placing them at a significant advantage for admission to the their institution of choice. Advisors in the public system are required to advise students on a wider range of options and often lack the specific knowledge required for admission to prestigious programs and institutions.

The availability of merit scholarships did not influence the PSE decisions of high-achieving students, who were extremely well positioned to receive large scholarships at all institutions.

*A Report on the Postsecondary Decisions of High-Achieving Students in Ontario* is written by Jeff Burrow, Martin Dooley, Tyler Wright and Lindsay Declou.