

Stakeholder summary

Canadian postsecondary performance: Money can't buy you love

When it comes to Canadian universities, the level of funding doesn't predict performance, according to a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). In its newest and most comprehensive analysis of Canadian postsecondary systems, HEQCO finds that Ontario and Nova Scotia are top performers overall despite lower per-student operating costs, while other provinces that spend the same or in some cases considerably more money achieve average or below average performance.

"It's no longer just a question of *how much* money is spent on postsecondary education," says HEQCO president and CEO Harvey P. Weingarten. "It's a question of *how* the money is spent and what outcomes are achieved."

Project description

Canadian Postsecondary Performance: Impact 2015 examines provincial postsecondary system outcomes along three dimensions and 34 indicators. **Access** indicators include overall and equitable access to higher education; **value to students** indicators include the student experience, affordability and learning outcomes; while **value to society** indicators include job creation, innovation and citizen engagement. Outcomes are considered in relation to the operating cost per student, producing an overall performance score for each province. While the report examines university, college and trades education, the relationship between operating cost and performance is only examined for university systems, as comparable national data for colleges and trades are not available.

"This report is not about winners and losers," says Weingarten. "The whole point of the report is improvement and the greatest value is in identifying where provincial systems are performing well, where they are not and identifying some pathways forward." The report also includes an interactive [web tool](#) that allows users to select indicators and focus on outcomes that are most meaningful to their specific province or interests to see how this might recalibrate the results.

Canadian postsecondary performance

Overall, Canadian postsecondary education is working. In every province there's a positive link between postsecondary education and labour market success, individual earnings, citizen engagement and contributions to the economy. The range of overall performance between provinces is fairly narrow; no province is failing to deliver and no province is a clear luminary.

Ontario-specific findings

As HEQCO's [2013-14 performance report](#) also found, Ontario does very well in virtually all access-related indicators but most notably in postsecondary participation (number of people attending) and attainment (adults with postsecondary credentials).

The access findings underscore the effectiveness of Ontario's enrolment-based funding formula over the last 15 years. Funding priorities should shift from enrolment to quality, as noted in HEQCO's 2013 report on the postsecondary sector's [strategic mandate agreement](#) submissions.

Overall, Ontario's biggest performance liability is in indicators most relevant to students, but improvements can be made without any additional expenditures. For example, Ontario has the highest "list price" tuition in Canada, but most students [pay considerably less](#) due to grants, scholarships, tax credits and government discount programs. As the report notes, debt levels for Ontario students are among the lowest in Canada three years after graduation. The province needs to better inform students about the true cost of their education. Its significant investments in postsecondary affordability would have a far better payoff if information about and processes for accessing such programs were repackaged and simplified, giving students a better understanding of the net costs of higher education – at no additional cost to the government.

Ontario's student-to-faculty ratio is also the highest in Canada. While creating more teaching positions has not been a government funding priority, [previous HEQCO research](#) has shown that if professors who are not active researchers taught more, the teaching capacity of full-time professors in Ontario's universities could increase by as much as 10%, equivalent to adding 1,500 additional faculty members across the province – also at no additional cost.

Among other findings, Ontario lags the country in trades attainment. A recent [HEQCO conference](#) on apprenticeship and the skilled trades revealed that the skilled trades have not been positioned as an attractive option, or one that is easy to access.

While Ontario does well overall in delivering value to society, it also has the lowest percentage of graduates working in a field related to their studies, posing the question of how responsive (or aligned) Ontario's higher education system is to the needs of the provincial job market. HEQCO is a vocal proponent of [learning outcomes](#) -- measuring whether students have acquired the knowledge and skills they need to be successful. A deeper and system-wide commitment to measuring these learning outcomes, and ensuring that they are developed to meet the needs of the labour market, is an opportunity for Ontario to show world-wide leadership.

Data gaps impede inter-provincial comparisons

The report also identifies significant data gaps that impede inter-provincial comparisons on postsecondary system performance. Federal and provincial collaboration could produce pan-Canadian consensus on a core set of numbers and a standard of data collection -- particularly for the college sector.

Authors of *Canadian Postsecondary Performance: Impact 2015* are Harvey P. Weingarten, Martin Hicks, Linda Jonker, Carrie Smith and Hillary Arnold; with contributions from HEQCO interns Jeremy Henderson and Emily Michailidis.