

Stakeholder Summary

As university access in Ontario increases, so too does the gender gap

University participation in Ontario has increased over the last decade, including students from lower income groups, according to a new study from **the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)**. But the gender gap is also increasing, as women continue to access university at much higher rates than men. That's a profound change from earlier generations, say the study authors, and the consequences will only be played out in the years to come.

Project description

Background Characteristics and Patterns of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence from Longitudinal Tax Data uses Statistics Canada's tax-based Longitudinal Administrative Databank (LAD) to explore Ontario's overall postsecondary education (PSE) participation rates from 1999 through 2008 and how access is related to individual and family characteristics including gender, family income, regional population and family type.

The LAD is uniquely well-suited to this analysis as it allows tracking PSE access rates on a year by year basis; permits linking youths to their families and seeing how access is related to family type, income, and other such factors, as well as how these relationships change over time; and the immense sample sizes available allow examination of these relationships not only for Ontario as a single province, but across regions within the province.

Although college attendance is also addressed, the report focuses on university participation because the PSE-related tax credit information available in LAD are less effective in finding college students and because the effects of individual and family background characteristics on PSE attendance tend to be more evident in university access rates.

Findings

The increase in PSE access reflects not only the dramatic upsurge associated with the province's elimination of Grade 13 in 2003, but also an upward trend overall. According to the study, the Ontario increases were greater than those elsewhere in Canada (the national comparison group excluded British Columbia and Alberta due to data issues).

The participation gap between men and women continued to widen over the period studied; by 2008, 55.9 per cent of Ontario females had attended university by age 21 as compared to just 38.4 per cent of males, representing a 17.5 percentage point gap. Other HEQCO [research](#) notes that despite the overall advances females have made in PSE attainment, they have not translated into full equality in occupational choices and earnings, where males have higher full-time employment levels and higher earnings in some occupations.

The new study also finds a strong correlation between participation rates and family income, with individuals from progressively higher income levels attending university at higher rates than those from lower brackets. But these gaps decreased over the period, principally due to gains at lower income levels.

The authors note that access to university in Ontario is less income dependent than in some other provinces. They also emphasize that the LAD data do not include information on parental education, which [previous research](#) has shown to be a one of the strongest determinants of PSE participation, and that the observed income effects are likely capturing these unobserved parental education effects.

Policy implications

The authors suggest that the factors determining who pursues PSE in general, and university in particular, go beyond economic issues. Also important are cultural factors such as early exposure to the idea of PSE and “being able to see PSE as a real option and being adequately prepared for PSE – all starting at a relatively early age.” They cite pilot programs that address cultural barriers as potentially the most effective and equitable means of improving participation rates, such as school-based initiatives that include PSE access as an option in the general curriculum, “starting at least at the beginning of high school, and ideally earlier.”

Further research would advance understanding of the determinants and influencers of access to PSE, including additional use of LAD, “which has barely been scratched in terms of its potential” for PSE access studies.

Authors of [Background Characteristics and Patterns Of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence From Longitudinal Tax Data](#) are Ross Finnie and Dejan Pavlic, University of Ottawa.