

Stakeholder Summary

Canadian colleges, universities use similar learning-outcomes assessment practices

Despite substantial differences between the Canadian university and college sectors, their thoughts and practices surrounding learning outcomes assessments are surprisingly similar, concludes a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). *The Landscape of Learning Outcomes Assessment in Canada* finds that both sectors assess learning outcomes for the same reasons, use similar assessment tools, apply assessment data for the same purposes, communicate assessment results using the same methods and identify similar factors as supporting assessment initiatives.

As statements that describe the knowledge, skills and competencies students should possess when graduating from an institution, learning outcomes allow postsecondary institutions to document the quality and value of academic programs — something that employers increasingly demand.

Project description

To understand learning outcomes assessment practices, HEQCO surveyed the provosts and vice-presidents academic of Canadian public colleges and universities in the fall of 2015. The survey explores a number of key issues including how common learning outcomes are in Canadian postsecondary institutions, what is prompting Canadian colleges and universities to assess student learning and how postsecondary institutions use learning outcomes assessment data.

The study also identifies the similarities and differences between the learning outcomes assessment practices in the Canadian and US postsecondary systems and the challenges associated with outcomes assessment, as well as strategies for improving assessment practices in Canada.

Findings

Of the institutions that responded to the survey, 58% of colleges and 43% of universities report having institutional learning outcomes — outcomes that are common to all students at the institution. US institutions are ahead of their Canadian counterparts in developing and adopting learning outcomes; a higher percentage of US institutions, 84%, had institutional learning outcomes.

Although the reasons for assessing learning outcomes vary somewhat among Canadian colleges and universities, program accreditation and a commitment to improve are the two most important factors driving assessment. Surveys are the most common method of collecting data on learning outcomes, although colleges favour employer surveys while universities use national student surveys.

Colleges and universities use assessment data for similar purposes: program accreditation, curriculum modification, external accountability reporting requirements and program review. While the information is shared within institutions, very little is made known to the public. The most significant factors found to support learning outcomes assessments are faculty involvement, institutional policies and centres for teaching and learning.

The report notes that there is confusion around the definition of institutional-level learning outcomes and some evidence to suggest that colleges and universities use different definitions of the term. The authors say that the lack of a common language makes it difficult to understand the assessment practices currently in use.

Authors of *The Landscape of Learning Outcomes Assessment in Canada* are Alexandra MacFarlane, HEQCO senior researcher; and Sarah Brumwell, HEQCO researcher.