



# Access to Postsecondary Education

## What Does HEQCO's Research Show?

- Students from low-income households, Indigenous students, those with disabilities and first-generation students are less likely than other students to pursue postsecondary studies and attain a credential.
- Continuing to increase the number of available seats in universities and colleges is unlikely by itself to improve postsecondary access for underrepresented students.
- To be most effective, interventions and support programs for underrepresented students should be implemented in the kindergarten to Grade 12 system.
- Making data derived from the Ontario Education Number available to researchers would provide a more comprehensive look at student pathways and inform evidence-based policies to support underrepresented students.



## What is the Problem?

Some groups of young people — including those from low-income households, Indigenous students, those with disabilities and first-generation students (those whose parents did not complete postsecondary) — are still underrepresented in higher education despite years of rising enrolments and expansion of the student financial aid system. What can the government and institutions do to ensure that all qualified young people who want to pursue higher education have an opportunity to do so?

## What Does HEQCO's Research Show?

### The Underrepresented Students

A considerable body of research has documented that students from low-income households, Indigenous students, those with disabilities and first-generation students are less likely to pursue postsecondary studies and attain a credential, although there is evidence to suggest the situation has improved in recent years for some groups.<sup>1</sup>

HEQCO research has found that high school students from a family where neither parent completed postsecondary studies are 33 percentage points less likely to complete postsecondary themselves than their peers whose parents have higher education credentials.<sup>2</sup> The postsecondary attainment rate for Indigenous students is 26 percentage points below that of the general population.<sup>3</sup>

Research indicates that improvements in postsecondary access have been made in recent years for some disadvantaged groups. For example, one study found evidence that Ontario experienced substantial improvement in the postsecondary attendance of high school graduates from across the income spectrum, including students from the lowest income group.<sup>4</sup> Another study, using a data set compiled by the Toronto District School Board, the largest in the province, concluded that household income and parental education were not barriers to successfully completing high school and attending college, although they were still strong influences on university attendance.<sup>5</sup>

Studies examining the effect of higher education on social and economic mobility have found mixed results. A HEQCO study found that first-generation students who completed postsecondary education earned similar incomes as their non-first-generation peers, and were just as likely to have jobs with pensions, bonuses, managerial status and job permanence.<sup>6</sup> A Statistics Canada study examining the effects of postsecondary education on low-income students found that young people who attended postsecondary had higher annual earnings after graduation across the income spectrum than those who did not. Those from high-income backgrounds had higher earnings after graduation than those from lower-income families; but the difference in earnings among students who attended postsecondary and those who did not was larger among low-income groups.

## Government Efforts Have Focused on Expanding Overall Enrolment

Government's efforts over many years to increase access to postsecondary education have largely focused on increasing overall enrolment, expanding student financial aid, capping tuition fees and providing targeted funding for institutions to recruit and support underrepresented students.<sup>7</sup>

These policies have resulted in a large increase in overall enrolment at Ontario's colleges and universities over the past 20 years. Ontario has become a leader in postsecondary participation and attainment in Canada and internationally. About 68% of Ontarians between the ages of 25 and 34 have a postsecondary credential (including apprenticeships), the highest of any province and among the highest of the major industrialized countries.<sup>8</sup> However, a proportion of students in the province don't pursue postsecondary education. In 2016, 22% of Ontarians between the ages of 25 and 34 had completed high school as their highest level of education and 8% had not obtained a high school diploma.<sup>9</sup>

## The Role of the K-12 System

High schools play an important "gateway role" in selecting students who will enter postsecondary education.<sup>10</sup> One way they do so is by streaming students into academic and applied tracks of study. Research studies have shown that racialized students, especially Black males, and students from lower-income families are more likely to take applied courses whereas students from wealthier families are more likely to take the academic stream. Students in applied courses are less likely to graduate from high school and be accepted into postsecondary programs than students in academic courses.<sup>11</sup> They also achieve lower scores on provincial math and literacy assessments.<sup>12</sup>

The Ontario Ministry of Education has implemented several student success initiatives to help at-risk students at the primary and secondary levels, including the Specialist High Skills Major, dual credits and co-operative education. In addition, there are many community-based programs that support vulnerable youth.<sup>13</sup>

Ontario's high school graduation rate has increased significantly over the last 15 years and is now at a record level. The five-year graduation rate stood at 86.3% in 2017, up from 68% in 2004.<sup>14</sup>

## What Can Be Done?

It is unlikely that all high school students will want to pursue university, college or an apprenticeship. Some will choose alternate routes. Government and institutions need to ensure that theirs is truly a choice, and that all those who want to pursue higher education have an opportunity to do so regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances.



The evidence suggests that increasing the number of available seats in universities and colleges is not the best way to ensure that underrepresented students have equitable access to higher education. HEQCO has advocated for interventions and support programs aimed at improving access for underrepresented students to be implemented in the kindergarten to Grade 12 system, where many important decisions that affect postsecondary pathways are made. An effective access policy must not only ensure that underrepresented students attend in greater numbers, but also that they graduate and reap the benefits of their postsecondary education in the labour market.

**HEQCO has called for:**<sup>15</sup>

- Government-funded access and retention programs that articulate clear goals and provide evidence of success.
- Using income tax files linked to student-record data to measure the participation gap and the effects of postsecondary education on the economic and social mobility experienced by underrepresented students.
- More assessment and evaluation of special-purpose funding for institutions to improve access and retention of students with disabilities, first-generation students, Indigenous students and other groups.
- Re-examining the practice of streaming students in Grades 9 and 10 into academic and applied tracks of study.
- Making enrolment in postsecondary savings plans for low-income families and debt-repayment assistance plans for students automatic.
- The continued funding of community-based early intervention programs that support the most vulnerable youth.
- Evaluating the outcomes of supports in place at the secondary level, including the Specialist High Skills Major, dual-credit and co-op programs to ensure they are creating successful pathways to higher education for the students those programs were intended to serve.

## **What More Would We Like to Know?**

Ontario is short of longitudinal data that tracks students from high school to PSE and into the labour market. Other jurisdictions including British Columbia, Alberta, the Maritime provinces and the US are further ahead.<sup>16</sup> The information we have about Ontario students has come from select data sets that have provided useful but limited information. Making available to researchers data derived from the Ontario Education Number, an individual identifying number that is assigned to students in the province, would provide a comprehensive look at student pathways and inform evidence-based policies to support underrepresented students.<sup>17</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Robson, K., Maier, R., Anisef, P. & Brown, R.S. (2019). *High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario; See also Ford, R., Hui, T.S. & Nguyen, C. (2019). *Postsecondary Participation and Household Income*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
2. Chatoor, K., MacKay, E. & Hudak, L. (2019). *Parental Education and Postsecondary Attainment: Does the Apple Fall Far from the Tree?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
3. Statistics Canada. (2017). *2016 Census Data*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
4. Ford, R., Hui, T.S. & Nguyen, C. (2019). *Postsecondary Participation and Household Income*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
5. Robson, K., Maier, R., Anisef, P. & Brown, R.S. (2019). *High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
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7. Deller F., Kaufman, A. & Tamburri, R. (2019). *Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
8. Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). *Education at a Glance*. Paris: OECD.
9. Statistics Canada. (2017). *2016 Census Data*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada.
10. Robson, K., Maier, R., Anisef, P. & Brown, R.S. (2019). *High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
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12. Deller, F. & Tamburri, R. (2019). *Early Supports for Accessing Postsecondary Education: Good, Bad or Indifferent?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
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14. Ministry of Education. (2017). *"High School Graduation Rate Climbs to All-Time High."* [press release].
15. Deller, F. & Tamburri, R. (2019). *Early Supports for Accessing Postsecondary Education: Good, Bad or Indifferent?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
16. Gallagher-Mackay, K. (2017). *Data Infrastructure for Studying Equity of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
17. See Gallagher-Mackay, K. (2017). *Data Infrastructure for Studying Equity of Access to Postsecondary Education in Ontario*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario; See also Deller, F. & Hicks, M. (2017). *"Spoiler Alert: It's the Ontario Education Number."* It'sNotAcademic. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [blog post].