



Fostering Differentiation among Colleges and Universities

What Does HEQCO's Research Show?

- A policy of greater institutional differentiation can be a means of preserving academic quality and ensuring that the province gets the best value for its higher education investment.
- Institutional differentiation can steer institutions and the postsecondary system toward set objectives.
- Ontario's universities can be grouped into distinct clusters. Research intensity and promotion of equity of access vary dramatically among universities.
- Colleges are more difficult to cluster into groups. Credential mix is a fundamental differentiator among colleges.
- HEQCO has identified several factors for supporting greater differentiation among the province's postsecondary institutions.



What is the Problem?

Greater differentiation among Ontario's colleges and universities can serve as a means of preserving academic quality and ensuring that the province gets the best value for its investment in higher education. What is the best way of steering institutions toward a system that values and promotes institutional differentiation?

What Does HEQCO's Research Show?

Since 2012, each institution has been asked to sign a Strategic Mandate Agreement, a bilateral agreement negotiated between the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and the institution that identifies its unique strengths, values and objectives. A policy of differentiation can help steer institutions and the postsecondary system toward their objectives.

HEQCO research has identified the benefits that flow from increased differentiation, including higher-quality teaching and research programs, more student choice, a globally competitive postsecondary system and increased financial sustainability.¹ Differentiation can also help reduce duplication of effort, enhance the effective allocation of resources and ensure the efficient use of public funds.²

Differentiation among Ontario's 20 Universities

HEQCO's first study to examine differentiation among Ontario's 20 universities was based on traditional measures of research and graduate intensity.³ Based on this analysis, HEQCO identified four clusters of universities: research-intensive, mostly undergraduate, institutions that fall in between and the University of Toronto, which stood on its own.

The study found that faculty members in more research-intensive universities had more research success (measured in research funding dollars) and impact (measured in citation numbers), and tended to teach less than faculty members at universities that were more focused on undergraduate teaching.⁴

HEQCO's research emphasized the need to place equal value on the teaching mission of universities as is placed on research.⁵ In a subsequent study, HEQCO expanded its analysis to consider the factors related to universities' teaching mission and the students they serve.⁶ This study presented a more comprehensive picture of differentiation based on four additional dimensions related to teaching mission: equity of access (enrolment of underrepresented groups), demand (student preference and selection), learning journey (learning environment, student experience, completion) and graduate outcomes (labour market outcomes and student loan repayment).

HEQCO's analysis found:⁷

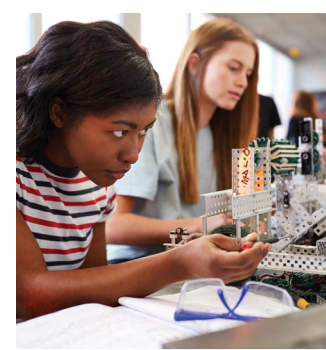
- Some universities play a significant role in promoting equity of access. These institutions are mostly undergraduate and regional institutions. They not only serve a greater proportion of students who have been traditionally underrepresented, they also serve students who arrive with lower marks, experience lower persistence and completion rates, and have higher loan default rates.
- Regional universities demonstrate relatively well-balanced profiles. They serve their region well in all aspects, though they don't reach the heights of some others in individual dimensions, such as equity of access or research intensity.
- Research intensity varies dramatically among the universities, more so than any other factor. The study found that Ontario's research-intensive universities have the highest student demand. They attract high-potential student candidates and deliver strong graduate outcomes.
- The University of Toronto is the leader in international research and reputation. It outperforms all others in the research intensity and demand dimensions.

Differentiation among Ontario's 24 Colleges

HEQCO's work on differentiation within the college sector began with a grouping of the institutions based on measures of degree granting, regional programmatic diversity and research activity.⁸ A subsequent analysis took into account the impact of graduate certificates on institutional profile.⁹ In the latter study, HEQCO also looked at equity of access, demand and demographics, student experience and graduate outcomes.

HEQCO's analysis found:¹⁰

- The colleges are fairly diverse based on the dimensions studied. However, colleges were more difficult to group than universities because they tend to have characteristics that are based on local factors such as geography and labour market requirements.
- The mix of credentials that colleges offer is an important differentiating factor. Some institutions have been active in offering degree programs while others have proceeded more slowly or not at all.
- Though each college has its own strengths in terms of providing access to underrepresented groups, Ontario colleges perform consistently well in ensuring equitable access for students.
- Small, rural and northern colleges serve the needs of their students and communities. These institutions perform well on measures of student experience and graduate outcomes.



What Can Be Done?

Based on its findings, HEQCO concluded that the province's universities and colleges demonstrated some degree of diversity. Additionally, HEQCO identified several elements to promote even greater differentiation among the province's postsecondary institutions.

HEQCO has advocated for a strategy that promotes differentiation based on clearly articulated provincial objectives for the postsecondary system. HEQCO has argued that differentiation should be a partnership between the government and institutions. Institutions should have a voice in developing their identities, and scope to respond to and tailor programs and activities for the regions and people they serve.

A differentiation strategy should be supported by effective policy levers. Strategic Mandate Agreements and the funding formula are tools that can be used to reward differentiation among institutions. These tools can drive institutional and system-level performance related to provincial objectives.

What More Would We Like to Know?

More research is needed to determine what other metrics and data sets can be used to assess institutional diversity and the best way to encourage institutions to meet their differentiation goals. This research needs to be informed by well-specified goals for institutions and the postsecondary system. Otherwise, differentiation risks becoming an end in itself, rather than a means to an end.

Endnotes

1. Weingarten, H.P. & Deller, F. (2010). *The Benefits of Greater Differentiation of Ontario's University Sector*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
2. Clark, I.D., Moran, G., Skolnik, M.L. & Trick, D. (2009). *Academic Transformation: The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
3. Weingarten, H.P., Hicks, M., Jonker, L. & Liu, S. (2013). *The Diversity of Ontario's Universities: A Data Set to Inform the Differentiation Discussion*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
4. Jonker, L. & Hicks, M. (2014). *Teaching Loads and Research Outputs of Ontario University Faculty Members: Implications for Productivity and Differentiation*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
5. Weingarten, H.P. & Deller, F. (2010). *The Benefits of Greater Differentiation of Ontario's University Sector*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
6. Hicks, M. & Jonker, L. *The Differentiation of the Ontario University System: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
7. Jonker, L. & Hicks, M. (2016). *The Differentiation of the Ontario University System: Where Are We Now and Where Should We Go?* Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
8. Weingarten, H.P., Hicks, M., Jonker, L. & Liu, S. (2013). *The Diversity of Ontario's Colleges: A Data Set to Inform the Differentiation Discussion*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
9. Kaufman, A., Jonker, L. & Hicks, M. (2018). *Differentiation within the Ontario College System: Options and Opportunities*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.
10. Kaufman, A., Jonker, L. & Hicks, M. (2018). *Differentiation within the Ontario College System: Options and Opportunities*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.