

Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario

An agency of the Government of Ontario



Conseil ontarien
de la qualité de
l'enseignement supérieur

Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

2020 – 2023 Business Plan



Mandate

“To assist the Ministry of Colleges and Universities in improving all aspects of the postsecondary education sector, including improving the quality of education provided in the sector, access to postsecondary education and accountability of postsecondary educational institutions” (HEQCO Act, 2005).

Mission

HEQCO informs the future of Ontario higher education through authoritative research, effective communication of meaningful data and evidence-based options for solutions to the challenges facing Ontario’s postsecondary system.

Vision

HEQCO seeks to influence the key decisions, practices and policies that will guide Ontario’s public postsecondary system to national and international leadership, while providing Ontarians with the greatest opportunities for social mobility and economic success.

Values

Primacy of independent, high-quality research: HEQCO maintains a distinctive position in the research community as a credible, authoritative and influential agency through a foundation of independent, objective, high-quality analysis to provide the best evidence-based advice to government and postsecondary institutions. Attentive to emerging trends, HEQCO has the agility to pursue promising new avenues of research as opportunities arise.

Sustained engagement with leaders worldwide: HEQCO’s global perspective on higher education research, policy and practice brings the best ideas, research findings and insights to Ontario. Many of Ontario’s postsecondary education (PSE) challenges are shared by jurisdictions across Canada and worldwide. Through these global partnerships, we ensure that the very best thinking from around the world is made available to Ontario decision-makers as a catalyst for informed decisions, collaboration and innovation.

Accessible and meaningful communication: In bridging the gap between research knowledge and its active use in addressing pressing challenges in higher education, HEQCO contributes to the effective movement of evidence-based solutions into policy development and best practice.

An advocate for data collection and transparency: Data is the lifeblood of evidence-based policy decision-making, yet our work is constrained by significant and persistent data gaps at both the provincial and national level. HEQCO remains an advocate for a more transparent, open and holistic approach to higher education data, in partnership with educational institutions, organizations and governments.

Accountability is a foundational tool for system improvement: Core to our accountability mandate, HEQCO explores system design models across the globe to improve postsecondary access and quality in Ontario.

Responsive to government priorities and mandates: HEQCO ensures that evidence-based research and evaluation of the highest quality informs policy decision-making and practice, in alignment with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities.

Equipped to achieve our goals: HEQCO is committed to ensuring that our organizational structure and staff capabilities maximize impact and drive toward the achievement of our vision for Ontario postsecondary education.

Environmental Scan

External Factors	Implications for HEQCO
Economic/Fiscal Situation	
<p>Ontario’s fiscal outlook was detailed in the government’s <i>2019 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review</i>: “The Province last balanced its budget in 2007–08. Since then, annual deficits have added \$107.3 billion in accumulated debt, bringing the Province’s total net debt to \$353.7 billion. The \$12.9 billion in interest the Province is forecast to pay on that debt this year is money that is not being used on people’s priorities instead. As a result of past fiscal decisions, interest on debt is the government’s fourth largest expense item. Balancing the budget reduces interest costs and frees up more money for priority programs. Over the last 16 months, the government has taken deliberate steps to balance the Province’s books. It implemented a process to help modernize government, find efficiencies and focus spending on priority areas such as health care and education. Additionally, the 2019 Budget set out a comprehensive five-year path to balance by 2023–24.”</p>	<p>HEQCO continues to respond to a need for strong evidence-based research in order to promote coherent, long-term higher education policy decisions to meet the demands of the economy and support Ontario’s competitiveness and prosperity. HEQCO’s series of publications on the sustainability and productivity of Ontario’s colleges and universities provides solutions to improve quality and reduce expenditures during a time of constrained resources.</p>
Government Priorities for Higher Education	
<p>The Ontario government has outlined a number of priorities for higher education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Free speech on college and university campuses - Ensuring the fiscal sustainability of colleges and universities, including a shift to performance-based funding. 	<p>HEQCO’s future-looking research priorities are aligned with the province’s higher education goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In addition to confirming that all colleges and universities have posted freedom of speech policies publicly, HEQCO published the first Freedom of Speech on Campus Annual Report in fall 2019. - HEQCO’s work on the sustainability of the postsecondary sector has illustrated the importance of expenditure controls. HEQCO is assisting the government as it develops meaningful metrics and evaluation tools for improving the funding model and mechanisms for holding institutions accountable, such as Strategic Mandate Agreements and disclosure of faculty workloads.

External Factors	Implications for HEQCO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Access to postsecondary education - Services for students with disabilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Under legislation introduced by the Ontario government, HEQCO’s evaluation function will expand to include projects specified by the Minister that involve the evaluation of postsecondary programs and services provided or funded (in whole or in part) by the Government of Ontario. As part of this function HEQCO will be evaluating Pathways to Education and the Ontario Postsecondary Access and Inclusion Program to investigate if funding is being directed where it is needed the most, possible improvements to the program and best practices in other jurisdictions. - HEQCO will also be evaluating ministry special purpose grants to examine if they are achieving their purpose of meeting obligations under the Ontario Human Rights Code. This will include their impact on institutions serving students with disabilities and best practices in other jurisdictions.
Stakeholders	
<p>Media coverage reflects growing public interest in the alignment of PSE to the labour market, the importance of skilled graduates and the value added by a postsecondary credential.</p>	<p>HEQCO’s research priorities, particularly the focus on skills, will assist in how Ontario designs, delivers, evaluates, improves and funds academic programs/institutions; credentials student achievement; and designs postsecondary systems. A deeper and system-wide commitment to measurement of skills is an opportunity for the Ontario system to show worldwide leadership.</p>

Strategic Vision

A high-quality postsecondary education system should provide Ontarians with exceptional opportunities for social mobility and economic success; act as a magnet to recruit the best talent to Ontario; create and support a robust economy and jobs grounded in an increasingly competitive, knowledge-based, global economy; improve opportunities for regional, economic and social development; and foster an engaged, socially-aware and civic-minded Ontario population.

Ontario requires a talented and highly educated citizenry; breakthroughs, insights and new knowledge; and enhanced entrepreneurship, innovation and productivity. Because of the students they educate, the discoveries and innovations they foster and the communities they support, Ontario's colleges, universities and other postsecondary options are instrumental to the future success and prosperity of Ontario.

HEQCO's evidence-based research is focused on finding solutions to the pressing challenges facing higher education. Through sustained engagement with leaders in the sector, HEQCO continues to explore pathways to critically important student and system outcomes. As the only organization of its kind in Canada, HEQCO is building on the vision that led to its creation in 2005.

By increasing partnerships and affiliations with world-leading higher education and research organizations, HEQCO helps Ontario harness the best thinking available on issues relevant to postsecondary education. These global relationships also benefit the many communities of practice that have emerged since HEQCO's inception.

As part of our planning process, informed by ongoing discussions with and guidance from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities, HEQCO has identified critical, long-term (2025) goals in access, learning outcomes and skills assessment and system design for the improvement of Ontario's postsecondary system. The next section outlines the goals and the strategies required to achieve them.

In 2018, changes were made to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act to allow HEQCO to research and evaluate how free speech is addressed by each postsecondary educational institution and across the postsecondary education sector. HEQCO has been asked to provide annual reports and recommendations to the Minister on the results of the research and evaluation.

Additionally, in the *2019 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review*, the government expanded HEQCO's role to conduct evaluation projects specified by the Minister. This expanded mandate will play a key role in providing evidence-based, independent assessments to help the government in making better, more informed decisions.

Our Goals in Access, Learning Outcomes and Skills Assessment and System Design

HEQCO envisions an Ontario postsecondary system that ensures a high-quality student experience; is more sustainable, innovative and productive; and that offers equitable access and success for all students but especially those who are underrepresented in postsecondary education.

Access

One of HEQCO's central research priorities is to improve access to higher education for non-traditional and underrepresented groups.

Strategies:

- Elevate the visibility and impact of HEQCO's work in access and retention
- Engage community partners across Ontario in collaborative and relevant research projects
- Build a data infrastructure to illustrate current challenges and identify promising solutions
- Identify and conduct research that anticipates emerging issues and trends in access and retention

By 2025 – Every Ontario Student has an equal opportunity to attend and succeed in postsecondary education. Participation and graduation rates for underrepresented groups will equal those of the most advantaged groups currently well represented within our colleges and universities.

Learning Outcomes and Skills Assessment

The evidence is clear: a focus on learning outcomes has the potential to improve quality and modernize teaching and learning across the province.

Strategies:

- Elevate the visibility and impact of HEQCO's work in learning outcomes
- Build a data infrastructure on PSE's value-add, with a focus on skills and competencies
- Adopt an international and best-practice perspective on learning outcomes

By 2025 – Every Ontario postsecondary institution annually identifies, evaluates and publicly reports the skills and competencies its students have acquired as a result of their postsecondary education.

System Design

As part of our accountability mandate, HEQCO fosters the enhancement of academic quality and choice across the system by promoting differentiation, outcomes-based funding and institutional sustainability.

Strategies:

- Support the diversity and distinctive nature of Ontario's colleges and universities
- Build system-wide consensus on academic quality measures
- Increase awareness of Ontario PSE institutions' academic and financial sustainability
- Continue to focus on funding formula options

By 2025 – All Ontario PSE institutions are sustainable and capable of delivering on their distinctive missions.

Agency Performance Metrics

HEQCO's performance metrics capture the impact and scope of the research agenda and the responsible, efficient use of public funds. These metrics are intended to provide transparent, output-driven metrics that are relevant and straightforward. The use of reporting metrics on research performance is a fraught process and adjustments will be required moving forward.

Research:

Research is at the core of HEQCO's work. The metrics below offer a starting point for capturing both the research output and the activities of research staff in sharing information with stakeholders and collaborating on new projects and initiatives. Metrics for reporting research impact are challenging to develop and strict quantitative measures may not capture the scope and reach of HEQCO's work. Efforts are currently underway to develop an additional qualitative metric that can be included in future business plans.

Research output - Number of HEQCO authored publications, including research reports, government evaluations (including the freedom of speech annual review) and assessment projects, briefing notes, research summaries and opinion pieces.

Target: 10 annually based on current staffing FTE

Knowledge mobilization and sector outreach - The number of times HEQCO staff present at conferences, roundtables and seminars on HEQCO research projects, or serve as a convener for sector stakeholders. These include virtual/remote conferences or events.

Target: 6 annually based on current staffing FTE

Administration:

As a government agency HEQCO works to use public funds in a responsible and efficient way that provides value to the government and people of Ontario. The metrics included for operational performance capture the success of HEQCO in making effective use of its allocated financial resources.

Percentage of administrative overhead - Ratio of administrative overhead to budget. This includes the salaries, benefits, IT, office equipment and operations costs of non-research staff.

Target: <10%

Management within budget - Deliver the mandate of HEQCO within the annual operating budget minimizing underspend. (Note: as a provincial agency HEQCO is prohibited from operating with costs beyond allocated revenues)

Target: <15% underspent

Communications:

Addressing the challenges facing higher education requires more than government policy. HEQCO's commitment to sharing its work publicly is a valuable resource to help inform the Ministry of Colleges and Universities as well as institutional leaders, faculty, students, employers and the general public to have informed discussions to help solve the difficult problems facing the sector. The metrics for assessing communications help capture not only individual report readership, but how many are

interested in continuing to read HEQCO's work. These metrics reflect the knowledge mobilization goals of HEQCO's communications activities.

Percentage of subscriber growth - The growth percentage of the collective subscribers to HEQCO's email mailing list, Twitter account, Facebook page, LinkedIn page and any future social media platforms.

Readership per product growth percentage - The average pageview count of research publications, blog posts and research-specific web content based on HEQCO's website analytics.

Target: >7% growth from previous year

Distribution - All research products (as defined in the research performance metrics) will be distributed to identified target audiences through accessible, bilingual products with a focus on digital formats on the HEQCO website.

Target: 12 products based on current FTE and research framework.

Research Plan 2020–2021 and Beyond

The research plan forms one component of our annual strategic activities. HEQCO provides evidence-based advice to improve Ontario’s postsecondary sector and our research is the foundation of this work. We conduct our work on the basis of data and evidence collected by conducting experiments, evaluating the outcome of projects and interventions, undertaking a deep analysis of data collected by others or assessment of best practices in higher education in Ontario, across Canada and around the world.

The Ontario government has indicated an interest in skills that aligns with HEQCO’s research focus on skills assessment and learning outcomes. As stated in the *2019 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review*, “The government has a plan to make sure today’s students, and tomorrow’s entrepreneurs, innovators, and workers, have the skills they need to succeed in a highly competitive global economy. From the first day students step inside the classroom to the day they graduate and start their careers, as well as throughout their working lives, the government is focused on ensuring every person in Ontario has the opportunity to reach their full potential.” HEQCO will continue to explore projects that build on our extensive body of work produced to date, to provide best practices and strategies for assessing learning outcomes and transferable skills.

Evaluations for the Ontario Government

The *2019 Ontario Economic Outlook and Fiscal Review* also outlined an expansion of HEQCO’s role in evaluating government-funded programs, as directed by the Minister of Colleges and Universities, to assist in “providing evidence-based, independent assessments of postsecondary programs and transfer payments while helping the government in making better, more informed decisions.” On November 6, 2019, the Government of Ontario introduced Bill 138 to formalize this role. As directed in the most recent mandate letter, HEQCO is currently evaluating programs related to access to postsecondary education and services for students with disabilities. HEQCO’s recent experience in reviewing digital strategies and initiatives will serve as a model to inform these evaluations.

Emerging and Ongoing Research Projects

- Annual review of campus free speech policy implementation
- Evaluations directed by the Minister to examine programs to improve access to postsecondary education and services for students with disabilities
- An overview of apprenticeship in Ontario and trades-based profiles of apprenticeship graduates
- Evaluating Lynda.com (now LinkedIn Learning) usage and potential for skill development (with eCampusOntario)
- Hamilton Community Research Partnership (CRP)
- Postsecondary and Workplace Skills (PAWS) Project
- International students – strategies and implications
- The value and role of microcredentials in Ontario
- An examination of the value of completion – does it matter more for some students than others?
- Lessons learned from Student Success Pathways Event
- Strategies and best practices for improving numeracy skills

- Projects exploring the data potential of the recently available Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform (ELMLP) through HEQCO's access to Statistics Canada's Research Data Centres

HEQCO's 2019 Research Findings

HEQCO continues to observe and report on changes in the postsecondary system and the surrounding environment in order to more fully understand the challenges facing students, government and the institutions themselves as well as to provide suggestions on how to improve the system for all those involved. The past year saw significant research findings in all three of HEQCO's main focus areas.

Ensuring that every student in Ontario has the opportunity to pursue postsecondary education remains an important goal and HEQCO published several reports related to access and retention, including reports on redefining access to PSE, the effects of parental education levels on PSE attendance, changes that can be made in the K-12 system to increase PSE enrolment as well as a cross-Canada comparison of student financial aid over the past 20 years.

The question of whether students are graduating from postsecondary institutions with the skills needed to succeed in the workforce continued to guide HEQCO's research of learning outcomes in 2019. This included reporting the results of a survey that questioned students about their perceptions of their skill levels and whether their postsecondary experience is properly preparing them to contribute to the workforce.

HEQCO also continued its work in system design through the publication of multiple papers. The government has announced its intention to tie postsecondary funding to outcomes in the coming years; HEQCO looked at various ways that this could be implemented and shared their findings. We also published strategies for colleges and universities in Ontario to better meet the needs of displaced workers and adult learners.

Two long-term HEQCO initiatives — the Access and Retention Consortium (ARC) and the Learning Outcomes Assessment Consortium (LOAC) — concluded in the spring of 2019. In the following months HEQCO published several final LOAC papers: one summarizing a project that explored the use of peer assessment on a large scale in order to assess skills like critical thinking and another that examined ways of measuring the development of students' higher-order cognitive skills over the course of their postsecondary career. The final report of an ARC project that examined whether changing the language used in academic standing letters could have an impact on student retention rates was also published. The final reports from ARC and LOAC will be published in 2020.

Freedom of Speech on Campuses

The Minister of Colleges and Universities announced on August 30, 2018 that publicly funded colleges and universities must develop, implement and comply with a free speech policy that meets the minimum standard set by the minister by January 1, 2019. The objective of the Ontario Campus Free Speech Policy is to ensure that all colleges and universities have a strong and clear policy that is consistent across institutions.

Institutions are required to submit annual reports to HEQCO by September 1 of each year detailing the implementation of their free speech policies. HEQCO will review and assess each institution's annual report and provide advice to the minister accordingly. HEQCO will also produce a public report that assesses whether institutions are compliant with the minimum standard. The first Freedom of Speech on Campus Annual Report was published in fall of 2019.

The following research reports were published in the 2019 calendar year.

Reports
Minding the Gap? Ontario Postsecondary Students' Perceptions on the State of Their Skills
Redefining Access to Postsecondary Education
Parental Education and Postsecondary Attainment: Does the Apple Fall Far From the Tree?
Postsecondary Education Metrics for the 21 st Century
Lifelong Learning in Ontario: Improved Options for Mid-career, Underserved Learners
Scaling Up: Value-added Cognitive Assessment Redesign Network for the Development of Higher-order Thinking
Early Supports for Accessing Postsecondary Education: Good, Bad or Indifferent?
Scaling the Development and Measurement of Transferable Skills: Assessing the Potential of Rubric Scoring in the Context of Peer Assessment
Postsecondary Participation and Household Income
Freedom of Speech on Campus - 2019 Annual Report to the Ontario Government
Great Divide or Small Fissure? A Comparison of Skills, Education and Earnings across Standard and Non-standard Workers
Evaluating Lynda.com Platform Usage: An Analysis of 2018–19 User Data
High School Success and Access to Postsecondary Education
Digital Review*
Academic Probation: Evaluating the Impact of Academic Standing Notification Letters on the Experience and Retention of Students, Followup Report
TOTAL: 15

*Submitted to Ministry of Colleges and Universities for review in 2019, published in 2020

Financial Requirements

HEQCO spent \$5.22 million in 2018/19 (includes deferred capital, interest and additional project funding). HEQCO's operating budget allocation from the Ministry of Colleges and Universities was reduced by approximately 20% in 2019. In recognition of the government's directions on discretionary spending HEQCO has cancelled most external research projects, cancelled plans for its annual conference and not commissioned any new external research in 2019/20.

Due to the expiration of the building lease, an office move will be required in 2020. HEQCO is working with Infrastructure Ontario to work within the government's targeted objective of consolidating office space. The move to a new office space is expected to achieve savings of \$300,000 – 400,000 over the two-year life of the lease.

Appendix 1 provides an estimate of financial resources needed for 2020–2023. Almost 83% of HEQCO's budget is devoted to research and related activities, 12% is allocated to council governance and executive services, and 5% is spent on administration.

Appendix 2 provides the Risk Assessment Reporting Tool for 2019/20 required by the Agencies and Appointments Directive and approved by HEQCO's Board of Directors.

Staff Retention and Development

HEQCO makes considerable investments in the selection, training and professional development of our contract and permanent staff. Given the multi-year nature of certain projects, staff retention is critical to the continuity and quality of the research products. To support the retention and development of staff, HEQCO works within existing provincial regulations regarding compensation, augmented by best practices in talent management, including performance assessments; mentoring; professional development opportunities; media-interview and writing skills; as well as opportunities for project management and leadership skills development.

While historically HEQCO has enjoyed relative stability in its staff complement, 2019 saw significant changeover in staffing. The departure of the President and CEO and other members of the senior management team has created a period of transition throughout the agency. Currently, an executive search firm has been engaged to conduct an extensive search to find a permanent President and CEO and hiring is underway for a Vice-President of Research and Policy. HEQCO currently has 16 full-time equivalent staff and is targeting a staff complement of 20.

Appendix 1: Financial Outlook (Attached)

Appendix 2: Risk Assessment Reporting Tool for 2019-20 (Attached)

Appendix 1: Financial Requirements

	Account Descriptions	2020/2021	2021/2022	2022/2023
REVENUE	Transfer Payments	4,100.0	4,100.0	4,100.0
	less Capital Purchases	442.5	15.0	15.0
	Deferred revenue	-	227.9	95.8
	interest	6.5	9.0	9.0
	Total Revenue	3,664.0	4,321.9	4,189.8
EXPENSES	Council Governance & Executive Services	14.6%	12.6%	13.2%
	Board per diem	7.5	7.5	7.5
	Salaries & benefits	376.5	384.0	391.7
	Travel & Communications	11.6	11.8	11.9
	Services, supplies and equipment	140.3	141.7	143.1
	sub total	535.9	545.0	554.2
	Research	83.8%	82.7%	81.9%
	Research contracts, seminars & workshop, data purchases, translation, communications	686.4	1,147.3	960.2
	salaries & benefits	1,747.1	1,782.0	1,817.7
	Travel & communications	28.4	28.7	29.0
	Services, supplies and equipment	610.3	616.4	622.6
	sub total	3,072.2	3,574.4	3,429.4
	Administration	5.4%	4.7%	4.9%
	salaries and benefits	162.5	165.8	169.1
	Travel & communications	1.4	1.4	1.4
Services, Supplies and equipment	35.0	35.4	35.7	
sub total	198.9	202.5	206.2	
	Total Resource Requirements	3,807.0	4,321.9	4,189.8

- Notes:
- 1 The budget plan for 2020-21 and beyond is based on an annual allocation of \$4.1 million.
 - 2 Project expenditures are reported on the accrual basis of accounting
 - 3 Common expenses (rent, IT support, office supplies) are allocated to each department by percentage of headcount.
 - 4 The current office lease expires Aug.31, 2020. Sept. 1, 2020 onward reflects our best estimate of possible future location lease rates.
 - 5 We expect relocation cost during 2020-2021 will exceed \$400K.
 - 6 Budgets presented are estimates only.

Note: The 2020-2021 financial requirements submitted were based on pre-COVID plans to relocate to a new office space and reflect the cost implications of that move. As HEQCO has shifted to temporary remote operation as of September 1, 2020 those expenses are no longer required. As a result, HEQCO's resource requirements for 2020-2021 will not exceed total revenue and the agency will operate within its funding allocation.

Appendix 2: HEQCO 2020-21 RISK ASSESSMENT

Risk Category	Risk Sub-Category	Risk Identification and Description	Likelihood of Risk Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row.	Impact of Risk (non-financial) Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Financial Impact of Risk Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Overall Assessment of Residual Risk Enter High, Medium or Low	Risk Owner Agency/ Ministry	Mitigation Strategy Describe plans or activities/controls in place to eliminate, minimize or manage each risk	Target Start and/or End Date of Mitigation
Strategic	<p>1. Fulfillment of mission and mandate, and 2.Strategic Planning: Identify risk(s) related to developing, revising or implementing a strategic plan that achieves desired results, is aligned with the agency's mandate and which is also aligned with ministry objectives.</p>	<p>1. HEQCO needs opportunity and resources to provide (1) independent, cutting-edge, new idea generating research that leads to new policy directions; and (2) evidence-based assessments and evaluations of existing policies and programs. Constraints on growth of research personnel would put HEQCO's ability to fulfill its original research and its assessment and evaluation mandates at risk</p> <p>2.The agency's objectives, as reflected in its business/research plan, do not align with Ministry objectives.</p>	<p>1.Medium 2.Low</p>	<p>1.High 2.Medium</p>	<p>1.Low 2. Low</p>	<p>1.Medium 2.Medium</p>	<p>1.Ministry and Agency 2.Agency</p>	<p>1. HEQCO Business Plan and Annual Research Plan realistically reflect the resources required for the Agency to continue to meet its overall mandate. The Ministry must ensure that the agency has adequate financial resources to continue to attract highly respected leadership and skilled and talented researchers to carry out the overall mandate. HEQCO and the Ministry must work together to engage Infrastructure Ontario (IO) to assist in finding a suitable physical location for the Agency to convene meetings, conferences and workshops and provide the opportunity for an exchange of ideas and staff collaboration.</p> <p>2.HEQCO's strategic direction is informed by the Minister's mandate letter. The deputy is on HEQCO's Board. The Deputy and HEQCO CEO meet regularly. HEQCO staff meet regularly with ministry counterparts. Strategic directions are updated annually in HEQCO's 3year rolling business/research plan approved by the Minister.</p>	Ongoing

Appendix 2: HEQCO 2020-21 RISK ASSESSMENT

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Strategic	<p>3. Meeting Public or Stakeholder Expectations: Identify risk(s) related to meeting publicly announced commitments, maintaining public image, or meeting expectations of stakeholders (e.g. the public, other governments, ministries, employees, suppliers, customers, media).</p>	<p>1. HEQCO research findings or sector evaluation may be rejected by particular stakeholder groups, do not appear to be objective, or may not reflect media assessments.</p> <p>2. Stakeholders dismiss the relevance and work of HEQCO.</p> <p>3. Government policy initiatives affect HEQCO plans and stakeholder expectations.</p>	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	<p>1.& 2. As an agency, HEQCO is well-positioned to put controversial and difficult discussions into the mix. The commitment to evidence-based research maintains confidence. Reports are external/peer reviewed. The research partnership approach is used with stakeholders/institutions. Findings are disseminated widely (posted on the website). Strategic advice is sought from stakeholders and as appropriate they are invited to sit on expert panels. The CEO/staff meet with stakeholders and participate in conferences, workshops, etc. locally and internationally. The recent mandate review by government confirmed HEQCO's relevance. There is ongoing dialogue with government and the sector.</p> <p>3. Due to constraints on discretionary spending, HEQCO activities to engage and consult stakeholders, such as the annual conference, were cancelled. With the increase in virtual events and meetings due to COVID-19, HEQCO is remotely connecting with stakeholders and partners in discussions to make sure its research is timely and relevant to the needs of the sector.</p>	Ongoing

HEQCO 2020-21 Agency Risk Assessment

Risk Category	Risk Sub-Category	Risk Identification and Description	Likelihood of Risk Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Impact of Risk (non-financial) Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Financial Impact of Risk Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Overall Assessment of Residual Risk Enter High, Medium or Low	Risk Owner Agency/ Ministry	Mitigation Strategy Describe plans or activities/controls in place to eliminate, minimize or manage each risk	Target Start and/or End Date of Mitigation
Governance & Accountability	1. Internal Policies, Procedures and Processes: Identify risk(s) related to management of the agency's own policies to meet the organization's objectives (including developing, updating, communicating, implementing and monitoring).	Policies or directives are not adhered to within the organization. Outside research partners find it difficult to adhere to government policies and directives.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	All policies are discussed with board/staff at meetings and posted on the SharePoint document management system. Contract/RFP templates reflect directives and must be agreed to by research partners. Ongoing dialogue with research partners ensures they know how policies apply to their work.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	2. Alignment of Agency Policies and Procedures with Same in OPS/Ministry: Identify risk(s) related to alignment or consistency of agency policy/procedure with OPS or ministry policy/procedure.	Agency policies do not reflect government policies and directives. Potential risk of a change in government policy or directive that HEQCO is not aware of.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	The MOU lists applicable policies and directives. The ministry regularly informs the agency of new/revised directives and policies. HEQCO consults the AGNES website (for agencies) for information. HEQCO's policies and procedures are subject to internal and external audit.	Ongoing

HEQCO 2020-21 Agency Risk Assessment

Risk Category	Risk Sub-Category	Risk Identification and Description	Likelihood of Risk Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Impact of Risk (non-financial) Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Financial Impact of Risk Enter High, Medium, Low or N/A for each row	Overall Assessment of Residual Risk Enter High, Medium or Low	Risk Owner Agency/ Ministry	Mitigation Strategy Describe plans or activities/controls in place to eliminate, minimize or manage each risk	Target Start and/or End Date of Mitigation
Governance & Accountability	3. Agency Compliance with OPS Directives, Policies and Guidelines: Identify risk(s) related to ensuring compliance with all applicable OPS policies, directives and guidelines.	Requirements of government directives are not met. Fraud or abuse in expense claims.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Policies/directives are incorporated into HECQO processes, the CRM project management system and contract templates. Segregation of duties provides for multi-person oversight of expense claims. HEQCO's DOA framework was reviewed by Internal Audit Division. Ministry staff ensures HEQCO is aware of changes to OPS Directives.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	4. Annual Business Plan: Identify risks related to the development of a three-year business plan that is approved by the minister (including version to be posted online).	1. HEQCO Business Plan (BP) does not meet Agency & Appointments Accountability Directive (AAD) requirements for approval. HEQCO does not post the Business Plan (BP) as required by the AAD. 2. Delayed ministerial approval of business plans may ultimately prevent long term planning.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency and Ministry	1. There is ongoing dialogue between the board and the deputy. HEQCO/MCU meet regularly re: research priorities. HEQCO schedules its process to meet submission deadlines. BP planning processes strive to meet requirements of the AAD. 2. HEQCO assumes that long term BP initiatives are aligned based on ongoing dialogue with the ministry.	Ongoing

HEQCO 2020-21 Agency Risk Assessment

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Governance & Accountability	5. Internal governance and development of board: Identify risks related to ensuring the roles and responsibilities of the chair, CEO, directors and managers are clearly understood, including conflict of interest, ethics and conduct.	The roles of the chair, CEO, board directors are not clearly understood leading to the board making improper decisions.	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Agency	Board members receive an orientation binder including foundation documents that define roles/responsibilities and include government policies and directives. CEO and staff roles are defined by job descriptions. CEO and board members attend ethics and governance training. Board members are required to sign a Conflict of Interest statement and to declare conflicts in board meetings.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	6. Risk and Issue Management: Identify risks related to the day-to-day management of risks and contentious issues, including identifying, monitoring and responding to risks and issues.	Risks are not mitigated and issues are not managed.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Risks are assessed annually. Issues are identified and addressed at weekly senior management meetings. Contentious issues are managed within the context of a Ministry/Agency Communications Protocol.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	7. Performance Measurement: Identify risks related to developing or monitoring performance indicators and targets, and ensuring they remain relevant.	Agency performance is not measured or measures are not relevant.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Performance goals are set out in the agency's mandate letter, stated and reported in the Business and Research Plan. CEO and staff performance is reviewed against commitments. Management monitors project status reports. The CRM system provides management information reports.	Ongoing

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Governance & Accountability	8. Legal Costs: Identify risks related to the potential cost of a contractual agreement or litigation against the agency or government. Legal costs could include lawsuits, settlements, fines, penalties and legal fees.	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Agency	There are no known legal costs anticipated in relation to contractual obligations.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	9. Reliability of Financial Systems: Identify risks related to the quality or reliability of financial reporting and financial controllership. Could include risk related to a change in accounting principles or requirements.	Financial information is not up to date, accurate, or reliable.	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Agency	The Sage 50 accounting system provides financial reports. Ceridian provides payroll services. The financial process requires segregation of duties for reconciliation, journal entry, payroll, payments. Bank statements are reconciled monthly. Accrued liabilities are updated and recorded monthly. All financial transactions are readily available for audit. HEQCO's financials are audited by an external independent auditor.	Ongoing

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Governance & Accountability	10. Financial Management Processes: Identify risks related to management of financial policies (including development, updating and monitoring), budget controls, and compliance with ministry forecasting requirements.	Internal financial planning processes and controls are not in place.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency and Ministry	Internal process controls are audited annually. Senior management meets bi-monthly to review financial commitments. CRM and the Sage 50 accounting system are integrated. Sage 50 is kept current as transactions occur. CRM provides up-to-date project status, invoicing and payment reports. Quarterly financial reports are provided to the board and minister. Reports are immediately available on request.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	11. Budget Planning Process: Identify risks related to meeting the requirements of the ministry's budget planning (PRRT) process.	The agency does not meet budget planning requirements or timelines. Timing of first quarterly instalment of the transfer payment from the ministry can jeopardize the agency's ability to meet first quarter commitments.	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Agency	HEQCO complies with MOU corporate reporting requirements. If available, a budget surplus from the previous year is used to temporarily ease first quarter pressures. HEQCO plans activities within its budget allocation and submits required reports on time.	Ongoing

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Governance & Accountability	12. Procedures for Financial and Accounting Transactions: Identify risks related to or ensuring accurate and timely processing of transactions, including development and monitoring of processes carried out by staff.	Transactions are inaccurate or inappropriate, or payments are not made in a timely fashion.	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Agency	Financial staff cross-check each other's work for all transactions. A second level of checking is provided by the CAO. Segregation of duties and requirements of the Delegation of Authority (DOA) involve multiple persons in the process. There is an annual external audit of all transactions.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	13. Reporting of Financial Information: Identify risks related to the timing, integrity, and delivery of the information reported.	Timing of financial reporting does not support decision-making.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Financial reports are available on request. Quarterly reports are provided to the board and the minister. The CEO and CAO sign-off on monthly bank reconciliations. To date, no issues of timing or integrity of financial information have been reported to the Audit Committee or the board by external auditors. HEQCO routinely receives a "clean" audit.	Ongoing
Governance & Accountability	14. Delegation of Authority Controls: Identify risks related to ensuring controls in place for appropriate delegation of authority.	Transactions are not properly authorized.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Delegation of authority (DOA) rules are incorporated into agency documents (contracts, purchase orders, etc.), processes and procedures. Segregation of duties requires multiple sign-offs, provides oversight of transactions. Expenditures over \$100,000 are reported to the Board.	Ongoing

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Operational	1. Service Demand: Identify risks that relate to managing or meeting the demand for the agency's goods or services.	1. The year-to-year financial business model is not helpful as HEQCO's work involves multi-year projects. 2. Budget cuts of almost \$1M threaten operations and agency doesn't have sufficient financial resources to accommodate increased in-year demand for its services from the ministry.	Medium	Low	Medium	Low	Agency and Ministry	1. HEQCO utilizes partnerships to partially mitigate this problem. As well, we attempt to phase projects to try to avoid the issue of uncertainty related to year to year variance in budget allocation. 2. When demands for additional projects at the request of the ministry strain budget capacity, these projects have been supported by additional funds from the ministry through transfer payment agreements. Interim and final reports are provided.	Ongoing

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Operational	<p>2. Service Effectiveness, Supply, Threats: Identify risks that relate to quality and/or delivery of products or services. Consider external factors that may affect the agency's products/services.</p>	<p>1. Non-completion of projects by research partners, or quality issues affecting external or internal research projects.</p> <p>2. HEQCO work does not meet high standards.</p> <p>3. Inability of HEQCO to fulfill its responsibility to examine, understand and recommend improvements to postsecondary access, student mobility, and student success due to lack of access to the Ontario Education Number (OEN) databases held by government.</p> <p>4. HEQCO research projects are at risk because data sources such as StatsCan and the use of RDCs are unavailable, and partners such as school boards do not have staff available to participate, due to COVID-19.</p>	<p>Medium</p> <p>Low</p> <p>Medium</p>	<p>Low</p> <p>Low</p> <p>Medium (HEQCO relies on other, less robust and complete sources of data for its investigations.)</p>	<p>Low</p> <p>Low</p> <p>Low</p>	<p>Low</p> <p>Low</p> <p>Medium</p>	<p>Agency</p> <p>Agency</p> <p>Agency and Ministry</p>	<p>1. Contracts include interim deliverables, firm deadlines and can be cancelled or not renewed.</p> <p>2. Reports are subject to external/peer and editorial review. We are invited to participate in national/international forums, international experts present at our events. Our participation in partnerships is sought by international agencies (e.g. Lumina Foundation) in multi-national projects.</p> <p>3. HEQCO appreciates collegial efforts by MCU to facilitate limited access to aggregate OEN data compiled within MCU. We continue to participate with MCU on its request to gain secure FIPPA compliant access to OEN databases in order to end reliance on less complete and less robust sources of institutional and government data to do the best possible research for MCU.</p> <p>4. HEQCO staff are creative in finding data and do their own surveys to support research projects such as the Accessibility of Remote Learning project. Unusual sources of data are sought out through partners such as the Business and Higher Education Roundtable (BHER) which has access to a large database of employers. Staff regularly check in with StatsCan and RDCs to determine their status and contact partners to determine if their participation can resume.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>

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Operational	3. Records/File Management: Identify risks that relate to the administration (i.e. filing and storage) of paper based records so that information is easily retrievable.	1. HEQCO records cannot be readily accessed in the remote working environment. Paper records are not easily retrievable.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	All records are now virtually maintained. All staff have access to the SharePoint document management system which stores documents in a readily accessible, consistent format. Project management records are stored on the CRM system. All publications are published and maintained on the website which is backed-up by HEQCO's IT service providers. Paper records tend to be historical and are stored by Iron Mountain and can be readily retrieved as necessary.	Ongoing
Operational	4. Records/File Security: Identify risks that relate to security of non IT records (such as paper records, etc.)	Paper records are not secure.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	All staff are trained on record management functions related to their positions. Confidential records, are only accessible on a need-to-know basis. Confidential paper records will be converted to virtual records this fall and the paper versions will be destroyed. In the event of a privacy breach the federal and provincial Information and Privacy Commissioners would be immediately notified along with all persons who are affected.	Ongoing conversion of paper records to online versions will be completed in fall 2020.

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Operational	5. Records/File Security: Identify risks that relate to security of IT records (such as memory sticks, shared drives ,etc.).	IT records are not secure.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Access to records is limited within HEQCO (no outside users). Access to system drives is limited on a need-to-know/input basis. The agency's bonded IT service provider hosts HEQCO data in a secure location with three server locations to ensure that the file server is always secure and available. Staff is aware of IT policies and processes re: safe storage of data.	Ongoing
	6. Records Retention: Identify risks that relate to creating , managing or complying with record retention schedules.	The agency does not comply with records retention schedules.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Documents are retained and backed-up electronically. Records retention policies are followed.	Ongoing

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	1. Skill Shortage: Identify risks that relate to availability of a skilled workforce to meet current or future needs; or relate to training existing staff.	1. Skilled employees are not available to meet agency needs. 2. Staff/talent retention becomes an issue because of the transition to a remote workplace.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	1. Staff hiring competitions receive an excellent response. Employees have access to a budget allocation for training which must be work-related. 2. Staff are provided with all the supports necessary to work from home. HEQCO will work with Infrastructure Ontario to ultimately find a permanent location informed by its remote working experience. HEQCO's traditional catchment area for recruiting has been the large pool of young PhD grads and post doctoral fellows in the Toronto area.	Ongoing
Workforce	2. Salary/Compensation: Identify risks related to increased costs from anticipated salary settlements, contracts, organizational growth or other causes.	1. Wage freezes affect the agency's ability to attract and retain staff.	Medium	Medium	Low	Medium	Agency	1. Position classifications and salaries are regularly reviewed and compared with ministry and similar agency equivalents as appropriate.	Ongoing

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Workforce	3. Succession Planning: Identify risks related to managing vacancies.	Unexpected vacancies lead to interrupted service.	Medium	Medium	Low	Low	Agency	Attempts have been made to assign overlapping responsibilities to cover for unexpected absences. Vendors of record can quickly provide temp admin staff, expert services. Researchers can be drawn from lists of previous competitions.	Ongoing
Workforce	4. Ethics: Identify risks related to compliance with code of ethics and/or conflict of interest policy.	Staff/board members are not versed in public service ethics and conflict of interest rules.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Copies of the COI and Ethics Code are provided to board members/staff when they are appointed. New hires and appointees must sign an attestation to confirm that they have read these policies. Both policies are posted on the widely accessible SharePoint system.	Ongoing

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Information Technology & Infrastructure	<p>1. IT Strategy: Identify whether the agency has a strategic or operational plan for managing IT resources (technology, people and processes). Identify any risks related to ensuring IT strategy or plan is current and supports agency's objectives.</p>	<p>1. IT resources do not support business needs.</p> <p>2. IT supports do not adequately serve the remote workplace. Staff home IT services may be insufficient to meet the needs of remote work.</p>	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	<p>1. IT infrastructure has been mapped, upgraded and virtualized to meet business needs. SharePoint and CRM systems assist project and records management. HEQCO website has been completely revamped and updated and is currently in the testing phase before it goes live.</p> <p>2. IT service level agreements are being reviewed and will be revised if necessary to ensure that the remote workplace is fully supported. HEQCO has established policies for addressing staff IT needs for equipment and technical support.</p>	<p>Ongoing.</p> <p>1. New website will go live in fall 2020.</p> <p>2. Service Level Agreement Review and revision to be completed in fall 2020.</p>

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Information Technology & Infrastructure	2. IT Policy and Procedure: Identify risks related to ensuring IT roles, responsibilities, policies and procedures are in place to maintain confidentiality, integrity and reliability of information.	1. Agency information is not secure. 2. Research partners and their research ethics boards are concerned about data security in HEQCO's new remote working environment.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	1. Access to IT resources is limited within HEQCO (no outside users). Access to system drives is limited on a need-to-know/input basis. The agency's bonded IT service provider hosts HEQCO data in a secure location with three server locations to ensure that the file server is always secure and available. Staff is aware of IT policies and processes re: safe storage of data. 2. Support services have been engaged to maintain data security as required by research partners. This is essential to HEQCO's success as a virtual agency.	Ongoing
Information Technology & Infrastructure	3. IT Privacy and Security: Identify risks related to managing sensitive/confidential information and protecting data from compromise, breach or other unauthorized access.	Personal information is inadvertently disclosed.	Low	Medium	Low	Low	Agency	All data for research is scrubbed of personal identifiers. Personal information of staff/board members is kept in HR files in a locked cabinet and secure directory accessible only to the CAO and two staff persons. Hiring and RFP protocols prescribe that personal information be safeguarded throughout the process.	Ongoing

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Information Technology & Infrastructure	4. IT Equipment/Hardware: Identify risks related to maintaining, upgrading or replacing hardware. Identify risks related to a business continuity plan or disaster recovery plan.	Loss of critical information due to disaster.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Systems are current and kept up to date. IT service provider backs up HEQCO information nightly. If service provider's Toronto facilities are at risk, back up is available in Mississauga and ultimately in the USA.	Ongoing
Information Technology & Infrastructure	5. Reliability and Integrity of Software: Identify risks related to software to ensure reliability, availability and integrity of information. Identify risks related to a business continuity plan or disaster recovery plan.	Inconsistent protection or maintenance of data and records.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	CRM tracks, organizes and records project information in a consistent format. A complementary SharePoint system stores documents. Information is accessed by designated staff and is password protected. Data is available to specified licensed users. Data stored on USB devices is encrypted. There is no outside data sharing.	Ongoing
Information Technology & Infrastructure	6. IT Procurement: Identify risks related to adherence to the agency's I&IT procurement policies which should align with OPS policies.	HEQCO procurements can potentially embarrass the government and/or the agency.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	HEQCO IT procurement practices follow government directives. RFP and contract templates reflect government requirements. Access to information is restricted to relevant staff. The IT procurement process must be approved by the CEO and is controlled by the CAO.	Ongoing

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Information Technology & Infrastructure	7. Capital Projects: Identify risks related to scheduling/delays and costs of IT or other agency infrastructure projects.	Capital projects are over budget due to cost escalation and delays.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Capital projects are relatively small and limited to renovations or computer refresh. The RFP process is used. Contracts are strictly monitored. Cost over-rides must be signed-off by the CEO and CAO. Projects over \$100,000 must be reported to the Board.	Ongoing

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Governance	Board governance, accountability and oversight	Slow appointments process creates operational difficulties for the agency.	Low	Medium	Low	Medium	Agency	The chair alerts the minister of upcoming board vacancies well in advance of their occurrence. Lists of possible appointees are provided. HEQCO regularly reminds the deputy and ministry liaison staff of potential vacancies.	Ongoing
Governance	Board governance, accountability and oversight	Board member comportment (poor judgement, breach of confidentiality, undeclared conflict of interest).	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	Board members are provided with internal policies, HEQCO orientation, governance training for new appointees. Conflicts are declared at the commencement of meetings. Internal policies are being updated.	Ongoing