

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

2021–2024 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 and provide 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 and practitioners 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. HEQCO’s work is strengthened through relationships with postsecondary institutions, non-profit agencies and community organizations. Through these connections, 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.

Strategic Vision

A high-quality postsecondary education system is central to a successful Ontario. It provides Ontarians with exceptional opportunities for social mobility and economic success; acts as a magnet to recruit the best talent to Ontario; creates and supports a robust economy and jobs grounded in an increasingly competitive, knowledge-based, global economy; improves opportunities for regional, economic and social development; and fosters an engaged, socially-aware and civic-minded Ontario population. Through the talented students they educate, the discoveries and innovations they foster and the communities they support, Ontario's postsecondary education pathways are instrumental to the future success and prosperity of Ontario.

While there are notable strengths in Ontario's postsecondary education system, there are also important challenges in the current landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic is the most significant recent concern, but there are additional ongoing challenges associated with system differentiation, financial sustainability, defining and demonstrating quality and ensuring success for all students, regardless of their background. As the impacts of COVID-19 continue to change the way Ontarians live, work and study, higher education will be more important than ever. The colleges, universities and postsecondary education options of the province drive innovation and research, train and develop talented, globally competitive graduates and help the economy adapt and change to the new realities of the pandemic.

As the only organization of its kind in Canada, HEQCO's evidence-based research is focused on providing government, institutions, employers, students and parents with the critical information needed to meet the pressing challenges facing higher education, now and in the future. Through sustained engagement with leaders and practitioners in the sector, HEQCO continues to explore pathways to critically important student and system outcomes and provides the evidence needed to help Ontario's postsecondary system adapt and thrive.

Informed by ongoing discussions with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and leaders throughout the province's higher education sector, HEQCO's research agenda focuses on the priorities of access, quality and sustainability that have been at the core of HEQCO's research for more than a decade. But higher education does not take place in a vacuum and for the system to be successful it must engage with the challenging issues facing society. HEQCO's new research agenda reflects the broader factors that are currently shaping postsecondary education in Ontario and internationally: COVID-19, anti-racism and other movements spearheaded by the BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour), the shifting labour market, and an ongoing call for the sector to demonstrate its value.

In 2018, changes were made to the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act instructing HEQCO to research how free speech is addressed by postsecondary institutions. HEQCO was directed to develop annual reports and recommendations to the Minister on the results of the research and evaluation. Additionally, in 2019 the government expanded HEQCO's role to include evaluation projects specified by the Minister. This expanded mandate enables evidence-based, independent assessments to help the government in making better, more informed decisions.

Environmental Scan

External Factors	Implications for HEQCO
COVID-19 Pandemic	
<p>The COVID-19 pandemic has affected people all over the world and Ontario is no exception. The reach of this global pandemic is unprecedented and while its effects can be felt most on the economy and sectors like healthcare, education is also profoundly affected.</p>	<p>In light of the current environment, HEQCO has adjusted its research plan to examine some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the postsecondary sector as it unfolds.</p> <p>Like many other workplaces, HEQCO pivoted to a remote workplace due to the pandemic. Some previously available data sources became inaccessible due to this shift. Despite these complications, HEQCO's research continues and new data sources and partnerships are being explored for future projects.</p>
Government Priorities for Agency Sector	
<p>As part of the government of Ontario, agencies are expected to act in the best interests of Ontarians by being efficient, effective, and providing value for money to taxpayers. This includes competitiveness, sustainability and expenditure management; transparency and accountability; risk management; workforce management; data collection; and digital delivery and customer service.</p>	<p>HEQCO has established a series of indicators to ensure sustainable, efficient, transparent and accountable operation. The shift to remote operation has increased efforts to deliver services digitally, where possible, and to explore new possibilities for stakeholder engagement, partnerships and data opportunities. The new HEQCO website launched in late 2020 will allow for increased functionality and an improved stakeholder experience.</p>
Increased Attention to Racial and Social Justice Issues	
<p>Issues of racial equity, social justice and systemic prejudices and barriers received increased attention in the past year with movements such as Black Lives Matter. There is a growing awareness of the differential equity challenges facing BIPOC students and others underrepresented in postsecondary education.</p>	<p>Equity of access has been a pillar of HEQCO's research agenda since the agency was founded. The new 2021–2024 Strategic Research Framework extends this work with a focus on equitable access and outcomes for Ontarians. The research framework includes a number of access and equity topics, including the differential impact of COVID-19 on access and retention for students from traditionally underrepresented groups. Moving forward, access to data which utilizes the Ontario Education Number (OEN) is essential as HEQCO works to address these and other critical issues in postsecondary education sector.</p>

External Factors	Implications for HEQCO
Government Priorities for Higher Education	
<p>Communities across Ontario have been deeply impacted by the global pandemic. As we look to the future, Ontario's postsecondary education sector is poised to play a key role in the province's recovery. The pandemic has highlighted opportunities to modernize and strengthen Ontario's postsecondary system and support a high quality and sustainable PSE sector. The Ontario government has outlined a number of priorities for higher education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Improving the student experience by increasing funding for mental health initiatives on campus. According to <i>Ontario's Action Plan: Protect • Support • Recover</i>, "this funding will help students by strengthening community partnerships." - "Providing high-quality postsecondary education that is accountable, accessible and affordable is important in order to meet the current and future needs of Ontario's labour market." - Free speech on college and university campuses 	<p>HEQCO's research priorities are aligned with the province's higher education goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HEQCO continues to pursue research on improving the student experience including work related to retention of postsecondary students and the supports needed to improve student success. - HEQCO continues to conduct research as part of its evaluation function. Projects are underway that will help HEQCO provide recommendations on The Pathways to Education Program and the Ontario Postsecondary Access and Inclusion Program and ensure that funding is being directed where it is needed most. - HEQCO also expects to evaluate ministry special purpose grants in order to examine their impact on institutions serving students with disabilities. - In line with the government's intention to "create a fund to incent the development of new micro-credentials that respond to regional labour market needs" HEQCO is compiling evidence to inform strategic approaches to microcredential development and delivery, which includes engaging employers and prospective students in order to understand how they perceive microcredentials and the potential role microcredentials could play in post-pandemic recovery efforts. - HEQCO continues to evaluate how free speech is addressed by postsecondary institutions and provide reports and recommendations to the minister based on the results of its evaluation. The second Freedom of Speech on Campus Annual Report was submitted to the Minister of Colleges and Universities in October 2020 and published in December 2020.

External Factors	Implications for HEQCO
Stakeholders	
<p>Colleges and universities across the province are sharing their experiences of the hardships the COVID-19 pandemic is creating for students, faculty and administration, and support staff. Media coverage is focused on the ongoing pandemic, including its impact on the economy, labour market and the broader education sector.</p>	<p>Through consultations with leadership across the Ontario postsecondary sector, HEQCO's new research plan is focused on the priorities that matter to institutions, students and government. HEQCO's research priorities contribute to the broader conversation surrounding economic recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. Examinations of topics such as accessibility of digital learning, microcredentials and apprenticeship pathways can help provide guidance on how best the postsecondary sector can contribute to pandemic recovery efforts.</p>

Strategic Research Framework (2021 to 2024)

HEQCO has developed a comprehensive research framework (see Appendix 3) to drive the agency forward and provide valuable evidence-based guidance and insights at a time of challenge and change in postsecondary education. The framework explores critical issues in each of the core areas of HEQCO's mandate and was developed following consultation with sector colleagues and partners from colleges and universities, student associations, government, educational agencies in Ontario, and not-for-profit groups.

Several principles guided the research framework's development:

- Research activities should reflect, inform and improve the postsecondary priorities and policies of Ontario's government.
- Research activities should be responsive to Ontario's particular context but should also reflect larger national and international trends in postsecondary education and research.
- Research projects should leverage data available in Canada and Ontario, and should, where appropriate, introduce new data collection efforts.
- Research partnerships should support projects that are otherwise out of reach because of access to data, needed expertise or capacity challenges. Partnerships should offer true opportunities for collaboration in project execution and/or deliverables.
- Research publications should largely be generated internally. In some cases, more formal partnerships with external researchers, agencies or institutions will be needed to enhance or enable HEQCO's work.
- Research activities should aim to provide meaningful impact for government and/or sector stakeholders. Projects should bring information and analysis that would otherwise be unavailable to HEQCO's audiences.
- Flexibility should be built into the framework to accommodate unexpected issues such as data access challenges or additional real-time perturbations in the postsecondary sector.
- The new research framework should provide opportunities for HEQCO to build organizational expertise and capacity.

Access, quality and sustainability are represented in the framework as individual areas of focus, but as HEQCO research has shown over time, these priorities overlap in significant ways. For example, research focused on quality may also examine questions of access. It would be impossible to examine the quality of the remote learning experience without also considering the equity issues involved for students in remote areas or students who rely on campus support services to succeed.

Access

HEQCO's research in the access priority area will largely focus on equity of access, opportunity, supports and outcomes. Over the next three years the research projects will extend our understanding of key questions: *Who* has access to postsecondary education in Ontario, and *what* do they have access to?

Research will evaluate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on enrolment shifts and participation rates, as well as longer term impacts like labour market outcomes and earnings premiums.

HEQCO's work in the equity space will require building a robust data infrastructure, including data associated with the Ontario Education Number (OEN) that can be used to build a province-level understanding of equity across postsecondary institutions. HEQCO is leading a project in Hamilton bringing school boards, community groups and postsecondary education institutions together to share data on pathways and outcomes to better understand the equity issues impacting student success. Building these types of data tools is essential for understanding the complex factors driving inequities in higher education and identifying where more support is needed.

Quality

An immediate focus in the quality priority area is transformations in digital teaching and learning. All colleges and universities have accelerated the development of online capacity and expertise as in-person courses have become temporarily untenable; it will be important to understand the efficacy of emerging pedagogic, curricular and program changes. This research plan also includes a focus on transferable skill development—critical thinking, problem solving, communication and teamwork, for example—in the digital environment.

Two projects are planned that will update and expand benchmarking research undertaken by HEQCO. The first is an update of *Canadian Postsecondary Performance: Impact 2015*, a performance and cost analysis for Canadian postsecondary education. In the refreshed approach, an additional layer of analysis will consider Ontario institutions by region. The second benchmarking project is an update of HEQCO's *Still Worth it After All These Years*, which looks at earnings premiums for Ontario graduates across credential types.

Sustainability

Financial stability for institutions across the province is an important area of focus. As the pandemic unfolded, institutions expressed particular concerns about the decline in international enrolment; the costs of digital course development and delivery; and IT infrastructure needs. But questions of sustainability have long occupied institutional leaders and policymakers. HEQCO's plans in this priority area reflect immediate and historical issues, and the ways these are converging in the current environment. As the pandemic continues, research needs to be pursued on the longer-term effects on institutional stability. HEQCO's work will also consider costs and return on investment associated with postsecondary education.

Current instability concerns highlight the need to focus on the policy frameworks that provide infrastructure in Ontario's postsecondary sector. These policies — differentiation, growth and tuition, for example — have evolved over time and have shaped institutions' operational approaches. HEQCO's work will inform policy related to system sustainability, including levels of funding and differentiated missions to offer a range of credentials.

HEQCO 2021–24 Research Framework Overview

HEQCO’s research plans are summarized in the framework below. Arrows included in the table signal topic development for projects that will build and evolve over multiple years. The topics listed below summarize project objectives, not specific publications. Issues of data availability, logistics, partnerships and ongoing efforts to define research questions may impact the publication type and timeline.

Access		
Goals: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expand HEQCO’s access research to address equity in participation and outcomes for postsecondary students in Ontario. Elevate the impact of HEQCO’s work in access and retention. Build a data infrastructure to illustrate current access and equity challenges and identify promising solutions. Extend HEQCO’s research on entry points for reskilling and lifelong learning. 		
Year 1 focus	Year 2 focus	Year 3 focus
<div>Postsecondary preparation, access, retention and outcomes</div> <div>Trends in enrolment, participation and retention</div> <div>COVID-19 impact on student outcomes</div>		
<div>Equity benchmarking data development</div> <div>Equity benchmarking pilot projects</div> <div>Equity benchmarking reporting</div>		
<div>Historic and ongoing PSE attainment disparities</div> <div>Destreaming initiatives</div> <div>Apprenticeships pathways and completion</div> <div>Learning requirements and campus infrastructure for student success</div>		
<div>Evidence to inform reskilling, upskilling and lifelong learning</div> <div>Microcredential landscape and definitions</div> <div>Trends in participation and completion of alternative credentials</div>		

Quality

Goals:

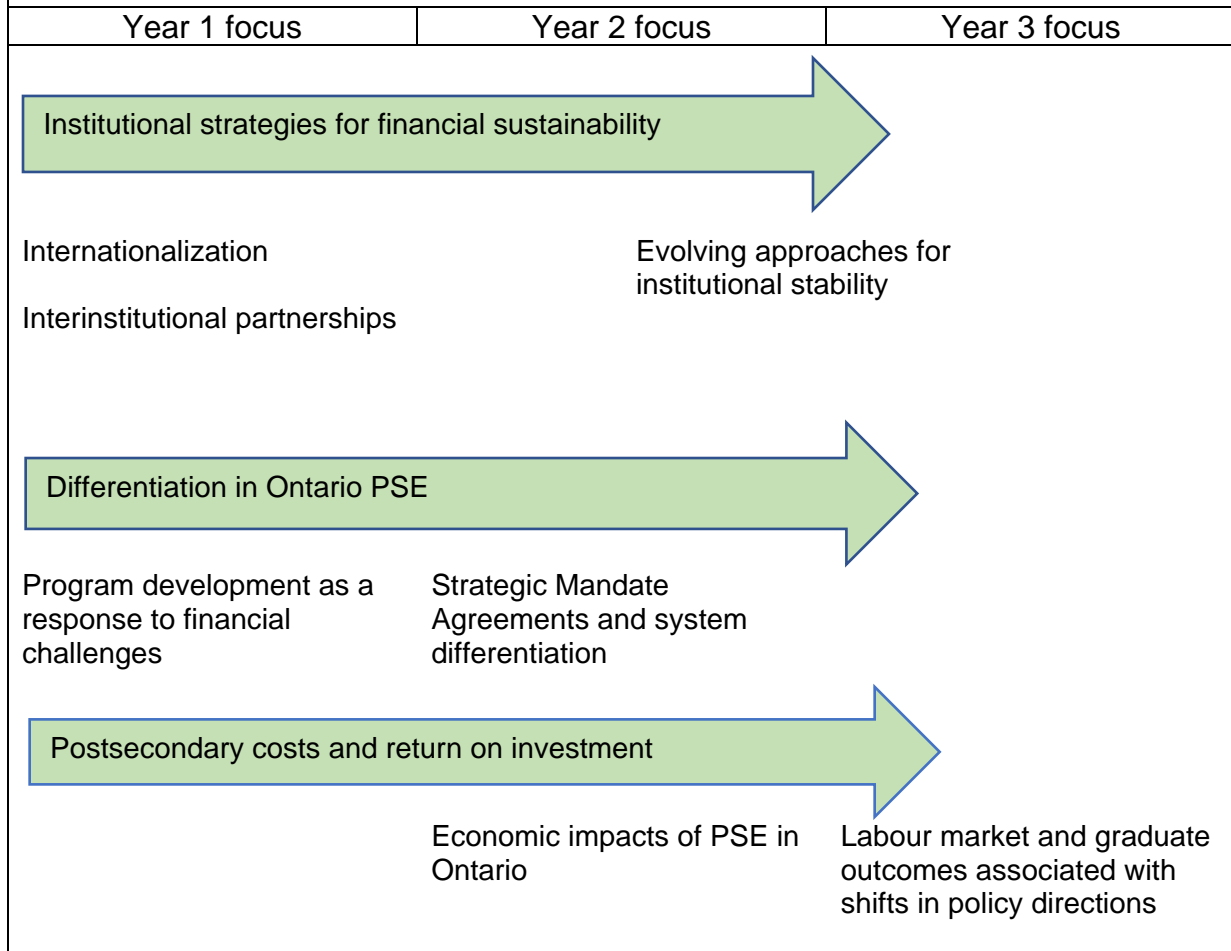
- Expand the impact of HEQCO's work on learning outcomes.
- Further develop HEQCO's understanding and evaluation of teaching and learning environments.
- Build a data infrastructure on the value of postsecondary education in Ontario, with a focus on skills and competencies.

Year 1 focus	Year 2 focus	Year 3 focus
<p>Transformations in digital learning</p> <p>Using learning outcomes to inform curriculum program design</p>	<p>Shifts in curriculum and pedagogy impacted by COVID-19</p>	
<p>Skills gap: trends, evidence and impacts</p> <p>Students' skill articulation</p>	<p>Transferable skill development in the digital environment</p>	
<p>Work integrated and experiential learning participation and outcomes</p> <p>Assessing students' learning and skills outcomes</p>	<p>COVID-19 impact on skill development</p>	
<p>Performance and cost analysis for Canadian PSE</p> <p>Earning premiums for PSE graduates</p>		
<p>Value of Ontario credentials for graduates across programs and background characteristics</p>		<p>Earnings premiums for post-COVID-19 PSE graduates</p> <p>Effects of employment disruptions on longer term PSE graduate outcomes</p>

Sustainability and System Design

Goals:

- Explore and critically review the PSE policy context in Ontario to chart a path to the future.
- Promote differentiation as a means to support academic quality and return on investment.
- Review Ontario PSE institutions' financial sustainability and cost structure.



Data Access and Ministry Engagement

The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic have created new challenges for HEQCO research. In recent years, HEQCO has used Statistics Canada datasets stored at Research Data Centres to develop new insights into issues of equity of access, labour market outcomes, apprenticeships and the skilled trades, and more. With opportunities to access this data limited due to the pandemic, the importance of expanding available data is critical. Of particular relevance to HEQCO's research agenda is access to data sets including the Ontario Education Number – at the system level, which has the potential of transforming our understandings of students and their experiences. HEQCO will continue to work with the provincial government to take steps towards developing this underutilized resource.

Evaluations for Government

As part of the expanded evaluation role announced in 2019, the Ministry requested that HEQCO review and make recommendations to improve and modernize the Ontario Postsecondary Access and Inclusion Program (OPAIP), Pathways to Education and disability funding. The OPAIP evaluation has been submitted to the Ministry for review and the Pathways to Education evaluation is underway. HEQCO also annually collects and reviews the annual freedom of speech on campus reports from colleges and universities and provides a summary report to the Minister of Colleges and Universities. Reports have been published for 2019 and 2020.

Summary

The research framework will serve as a top-level guide as HEQCO works with government and partners to support Ontario's high-quality postsecondary system. It provides flexibility to adapt and develop multi-year projects that are responsive and reflect innovative ideas and strategies in postsecondary education.

HEQCO's work is strengthened through relationships with postsecondary institutions, non-profit agencies and community organizations. These relationships assist HEQCO researchers with dissemination of publications, peer review of draft reports, review of research materials such as surveys, and advice regarding publicly available data. External partners may also serve as co-authors on HEQCO projects.

In recent years, HEQCO has responded to the government's focus on fiscal sustainability and accountability by shifting to more internally developed research projects as opposed to funding work by external researchers. A focus on internal projects means that HEQCO research is not only responsive to government needs, but able to adapt to what is happening across the higher education sector.

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: 12 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: 10 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: <10% 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.

In 2020, HEQCO launched a new website with improved design, functionality, accessibility and an increased focus at making research products more adaptable to digital delivery. Moving forward this focus will expand to leveraging this new platform to adapt to remote realities from the COVID-19 pandemic and expand the range of ways HEQCO engages with stakeholders including potential virtual gatherings and events

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: 18 products based on current FTE and research framework.

Financial Requirements

Approximately 85% of HEQCO's \$4.1M operating budget is allocated to research, the core business of the agency. The remaining funds support council governance, executive services and administration. HEQCO is projecting an underspend of \$1.2 million in 2020/21, as a result of decisions taken in the 2019/20 budget cycle which are laid out below and as a consequence of becoming a fully remote agency in September 2020.

- In the 2019/20 budget cycle MCU reduced HEQCO's operating budget by \$900,000 or 18%.
- HEQCO immediately cancelled all external research contracts and partnerships totalling \$638,515— many of which represented multi-year financial commitments for ongoing research projects. An additional \$399,848 had been committed for 2020/21.
- This triggered an immediate decrease of four staff persons and \$168,310 in salaries, and reductions in project pipeline and research productivity.
- Leadership change at HEQCO took over 12 months to complete during which time the agency operated under interim leadership in the absence of renewal of the research and staffing plans.
- The COVID-19 pandemic led to lockdowns beginning in March 2020 and resulted in the cancellation of all in-person HEQCO conferences and workshops.
- The Treasury Board's decision for HEQCO to decommission its office space by August 30, 2020 resulted in lease-related underspending of \$130,000 in fiscal 2020/21.

A re-engagement strategy with sector stakeholders and partners began with the appointment of the new President and CEO and Vice President, Research and Policy in the second quarter of 2020. Input was sought and received on the new Strategic Research Framework and plans are underway for proof of concept as well as multi-year projects involving sector partners. This work, coupled with the expanding

mandate to undertake program evaluation work on behalf of MCU, requires the expansion of the agency's research capacity. HEQCO will look to expand beyond its current FTE count in 2021/22 cycle.

In light of the circumstances outlined above and as a consequence of the plans now in place for renewal of the agency, HEQCO requests that its current base budget be preserved for the 2021/22 cycle to allow for the full implementation of the strategic research framework, including staffing and partnership renewal. HEQCO will also require resources to fund the full commissioning of a new permanent office location in the 2021/22 cycle.

Appendix 1 provides an estimate of financial resources needed for 2021–2024.

Appendix 2 provides the Risk Assessment Reporting Tool for 2020/21 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 equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), 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.

In 2020 HEQCO welcomed Janice Deakin as the new President and CEO and Julia Colyar as Vice President, Research and Policy. In conjunction with developing a new research agenda, an HR review was conducted to ensure the capacity of the agency to deliver on its mandate and ambitious research plan. HEQCO currently has 20 full-time equivalent staff and is targeting a staff complement of 25. HEQCO developed and launched work integrated learning opportunities for up to four Ontario postsecondary students and recent graduates through its internship program.

HEQCO's lease ended on August 31, 2020. Staff has been working remotely since then. While this may be a suitable arrangement at this time due to the pandemic, HEQCO needs 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. To meet the requirements of research ethics boards that govern HEQCO's activities with research partners, secure locations are required for data storage and analysis.

Office Space Requirements

HEQCO and Infrastructure Ontario (IO) worked together in 2019-20 to find a suitable solution for HEQCO's accommodation. While Infrastructure Ontario found an alternate location for HEQCO the new lease was not approved by Treasury Board, and HEQCO was forced to decommission its office and liquidate its assets within less than two months.

In 2021-22, HEQCO and the Ministry plan to work together to engage IO again in finding a new suitable physical location. Appendix 1: Financial Requirements 2021-2024 includes estimates for a plan to move to a new office in January 2022. In keeping with the Interim Measures for Agencies, the lease term is projected for 2 years. Based on IO recommendations for HEQCO in 2020, calculations reflect 2,800 square feet of space at net \$29/sq.ft., and gross \$57/sq.ft. Annual gross rent is \$160,000. Also, based on IO's analysis, leasehold improvements are estimated at \$350,000 and new furniture purchases at \$150,000. As noted above, these figures affect Appendix 1. depreciation expenses and deferred capital contributions heavily due to the two year lease term rule.

Appendix 1: Financial Outlook

Appendix 2: Risk Assessment Reporting Tool for 2020/21 (Attached)

Appendix 3: Strategic Research Framework (2021–2024)

Appendix 1: Financial Requirements 2021- 2024

	Account Descriptions	2021/2022	2022/2023	2023/2024
REVENUE	Transfer Payments	4,100.0	4,100.0	4,100.0
	less Capital Purchases	500.0	15.0	15.0
	Deferred revenue	113.5	205.0	117.5
	interest	9.0	9.0	9.0
	Total Revenue	3,722.5	4,299.0	4,211.5
EXPENSES	Council Governance & Executive Services	14.6%	15.1%	15.5%
	Board per diem	7.5	7.5	8.5
	Salaries & benefits	487.0	496.7	506.7
	Travel & Communications	5.0	8.0	8.1
	Services, supplies and equipment	34.0	117.0	119.3
	Depreciation expense	10.3	20.5	11.8
	sub total	543.8	649.7	654.3
	Research	80.4%	80.3%	79.7%
	Research contracts, seminars & workshop, data purchases, translation, communications	377.7	536.2	465.9
	salaries & benefits	2,200.0	2,244.0	2,288.9
	Travel & communications	15.0	20.0	20.2
	Services, supplies and equipment	302.0	476.4	481.2
	Depreciation expense	99.2	176.3	101.1
	sub total	2,993.9	3,452.9	3,357.2
	Administration	5.0%	4.6%	4.7%
	salaries and benefits	166.0	169.3	172.7
	Travel & communications	1.4	1.4	1.4
	Services, Supplies and equipment	13.4	17.5	21.1
	Depreciation expense	4.1	8.2	4.7
	sub total	184.9	196.4	200.0
	Total Resource Requirements	3,722.5	4,299.0	4,211.5

- Notes:
- 1

The budget plan for 2021 - 2022 and beyond is based on an annual allocaion of \$4.1 million.
- 2

Project expenditures are reported on the accrual basis of accounting
- 3

Rent is included within Services, supplies and equipment. Common expenses (rent, IT support, office supplies) are allocated to each department by percentage of headcount.
- 4

HEQCO staff is working remotely until Fall 2021.
- 5

Assume new lease for 2 year term (Interim Measures) starting January 2022. Calculations are based on Infrastructure C stru cture Ontario recommendations of 2800 square feet of space at net \$29/sq.ft.or gross \$57/sq.ft)
- 6

Depreciation of capital purchases and Deferred capital contribution are calculated based on 2 year for leasehold improvement (\$350K), and 5 years for furniture(\$150K) (Interim Measures)
- 7

Assume 25 FTEs from 2021- 24.

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	1. Fulfillment of 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.	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 2.The agency's objectives, as reflected in its business/research plan, do not align with Ministry objectives.	1.Medium 2.Low	1.High 2.Medium	1.Low 2. Low	1.Medium 2.Medium	1.Ministry and Agency 2.Agency	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. 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.	Ongoing

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	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).	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. 2. Stakeholders dismiss the relevance and work of HEQCO. 3. Government policy initiatives affect HEQCO plans and stakeholder expectations.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	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. 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.	Ongoing

HEQCO 2020-21 Agency Risk Assessment

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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

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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 HEQCO 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

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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	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.	1. Non-completion of projects by research partners, or quality issues affecting external or internal research projects.	Medium	Low	Low	Low	Agency	1. Contracts include interim deliverables, firm deadlines and can be cancelled or not renewed.	Ongoing
		2. HEQCO work does not meet high standards.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	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.	
		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.	Medium	Medium (HEQCO relies on other, less robust and complete sources of data for its investigations.)	Low	Medium	Agency and Ministry	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.	
		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.						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.	

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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	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.	1. IT resources do not support business needs. 2. IT supports do not adequately serve the remote workplace. Staff home IT services may be insufficient to meet the needs of remote work.	Low	Low	Low	Low	Agency	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. 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.	Ongoing. 1. New website will go live in fall 2020. 2. Service Level Agreement Review and revision to be completed in fall 2020.

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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

HEQCO 2020-21 Agency Risk Assessment

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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



Appendix 3: Strategic Research Framework (2021–2024)

December 28, 2020

Introduction

In an increasingly competitive global economy, a high-quality postsecondary education system provides the building blocks for individual development, social mobility and economic success. In Ontario, learners are offered a range of program and credential choices across colleges, universities and apprenticeship programs. Postsecondary graduates are leaders, entrepreneurs, innovators, professionals and artists. Credential, diploma and degree holders in Ontario contribute to the vitality of the provincial economy and the social foundations of communities.

While there are notable strengths in Ontario's postsecondary education system, there are also important challenges in the current landscape. The COVID-19 pandemic is a significant recent concern that has highlighted ongoing challenges in the postsecondary system including financial sustainability; defining and demonstrating quality; and ensuring success for all students.

HEQCO's Strategic Research Framework is a roadmap to investigate these and other emerging issues in Ontario's postsecondary landscape. The framework builds on the priorities of access, quality, sustainability and differentiation, that have long guided HEQCO's research, and it reflects the environmental factors that are currently shaping postsecondary education in Ontario and internationally: COVID-19; anti-racism and other movements spearheaded by the BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour); the shifting labour market; and an ongoing emphasis on public accountability.

The 2021–2024 Strategic Research Framework also addresses the priorities outlined in HEQCO's mandate:

- To assist the Ministry of Colleges and Universities in efforts to ensure high-quality student learning experiences and outcomes, and to support efficient and effective delivery
- To assist institutions as they seek to innovate and improve within a constrained environment
- To support student decision making about postsecondary opportunities
- To assist employers as they recruit well-prepared graduates into the workforce

Process

The significant public health and economic crises of the COVID-19 pandemic serve as an important background to the development of the Strategic Research Framework. While we anticipate that the focus for government and the wider public will soon shift from addressing immediate pandemic issues to recovery and renewal, COVID-19's impact on postsecondary education will linger. Some impacts will be most evident when current first-year students graduate and enter the labour market in two to four years. Financial impacts on students and families will shape educational opportunities for years to come. Transformations in teaching and learning will affect pedagogy and program design in persistent and positive ways.

Questions of access, quality and sustainability are amplified in the current context. The pandemic has illuminated and exacerbated social and economic disparities, and it has also underscored concerns regarding financial stability for postsecondary institutions. Black Lives Matter and other anti-oppression movements across North America have challenged the lens through which equity has been examined. Recent protests have powerfully articulated inequality and the need for extending HEQCO's focus on equitable opportunities and outcomes for all Ontario students.

This framework was developed following consultation with sector colleagues and partners from colleges and universities, student associations, government, educational agencies in Ontario and not-for-profit groups. Appendix A includes a list of consultations that were conducted between September and December 2020. A review of HEQCO's recent research also helped provide background and highlighted issues for future study. Over the past few months, we have also reviewed current scholarship related to higher education in Ontario and in other jurisdictions, and we have reviewed the strategic priorities for educational and/or research entities in Canada. Internal discussions with HEQCO research team members have also informed the development of this plan.

A number of principles guided the research framework's evolution:

- Research activities should reflect, inform and improve the postsecondary priorities and policies of Ontario's government.
- Research activities should be responsive to Ontario's particular context but should also reflect larger national and international trends in postsecondary education and research.
- Research projects should leverage data available in Canada and Ontario, and should, where appropriate, introduce new data collection efforts.
- Research partnerships should support projects that are otherwise out of reach because of access to data, needed expertise or capacity challenges. Partnerships should offer true opportunities for collaboration in project execution and/or deliverables.
- Research publications should largely be generated internally. In some cases, more formal partnerships with external researchers, agencies or institutions will be needed to enhance or enable HEQCO's work.
- Research activities should provide meaningful impact for government and/or sector stakeholders. Projects should bring information and analysis that would otherwise be unavailable to HEQCO's audiences.
- Flexibility should be built into the framework to accommodate unexpected issues such as data access challenges or additional real-time perturbations in the postsecondary sector.
- The new research framework should provide opportunities for HEQCO to build organizational expertise and capacity.

Strategic Research Framework 2021–2024

Since 2005, HEQCO has worked in support of an Ontario postsecondary system that ensures a high-quality student experience; is more sustainable; offers a return on investment for both individuals and government; and offers equitable access and success for all students. These priorities are retained and extended in the 2021–2024 framework.

Access, quality and sustainability are represented in the framework as discrete categories or areas of focus, but these priorities overlap in significant and important ways. For example, research focused on quality may also speak to questions of access; topics such as upskilling and reskilling may be explored as a component of lifelong learning or with a focus on the changing labour market.

The framework is not a static document. Rather it is intended to be a living and evolving guide that offers direction as well as opportunity. The directions for each priority area are briefly outlined below.

Access

For 2021–2024, HEQCO’s research in the access priority area will focus largely on equity of access, opportunity, supports and outcomes. Equity-focused research will extend our understanding of key questions: *Who* has access to postsecondary education in Ontario, and *what* do they have access to? This research will focus on students’ preparation for and transitions to postsecondary studies, including secondary school experiences and barriers to admission. For many students, the challenges of access also continue beyond matriculation as they navigate unfamiliar academic and pre-professional settings.

The shift to digital learning environments has also raised access and equity concerns. Existing challenges for students from underrepresented or non-traditional backgrounds, from lower-income families, or from areas without adequate broadband internet service will likely be exacerbated in this environment. Students with disabilities or accessibility needs may face unique challenges in digital learning contexts. While these challenges affect individual learners and graduate success, they also have an impact on the labour market and the longer-term health of the provincial economy — Ontario’s strengths depend on graduates’ resilience, ambitions and career and job readiness.

Our work in the equity space will require building a robust data infrastructure, including data associated with the Ontario Education Number (OEN) that can be used to build a province-level understanding of equity across postsecondary institutions. Cultural and administrative shifts will be needed as we pursue this work. In conversations with stakeholders and partners across the province, we have heard a clear commitment to taking these steps.

Given the urgency and importance of researching equity issues in Ontario's postsecondary sector, HEQCO's work over the next three years will:

- Extend our research on access to include equitable participation and outcomes for Ontario students.
- Illuminate disparities that are present in the postsecondary education system and may be compounded by the pandemic.
- Focus on equitable access and opportunities for students throughout their postsecondary careers.
- Build our capacity to analyze and report on regional equity indicators and continue to work toward provincial (system-level) data.

The skills needed to adapt to new environments and activities are important for graduates across postsecondary programs and credentials. While acutely evident in this moment, reskilling and lifelong learning have in fact been a concern for many years. Government, students and employers continue to focus on the transferable skills needed for graduates to successfully enter the workforce and progress along a career path, and access the lifelong learning opportunities that can provide support for transitions.

Given the changing nature of the labour market and the importance of graduates' adaptability, HEQCO's work over the next three years will:

- Focus on entry points for lifelong learning.
- Explore the profile and promise of microcredentials for retraining and reskilling.

Quality

An immediate focus in the quality priority area is transformations in digital teaching and learning. All colleges and universities have accelerated the development of online capacity and expertise as in-person courses have become temporarily untenable; it will be important to understand the efficacy of emerging pedagogic, curricular and program changes. Our research plan will also focus on changes that are institutionalized and retained beyond the pandemic.

Given the importance of understanding teaching and learning quality, HEQCO's work over the next three years will:

- Focus on understanding excellence in the digital environment, including experiential and work-integrated learning activities.
- Explore transferable skill development in digital and in-person learning environments.
- Analyze the evolving landscape for digital and in-person learning in the post-pandemic context.

Quality with respect to graduates' outcomes — employment, skills and learning — is another focus of our framework. Research in this area contributes to a broader understanding of the value of postsecondary education, and it provides an essential tool for improving teaching and learning practices. Students and families, as well as government and institutional leaders benefit when quality indicators are clearly outlined and assessed. Because these stakeholder groups define quality in postsecondary education differently, our research framework approaches the topic from multiple angles.

Labour market and earnings outcomes for all graduates are particularly important areas of study. Research on these issues will be enhanced with the addition of an equity lens.

Given the need for clear quality indicators related to graduates' outcomes, HEQCO's work over the next three years will:

- Pursue effective strategies for the assessment of graduates' skills.
- Analyze students' understanding and articulation of their skills.
- Examine the effects of COVID-19 on employment and earnings outcomes for postsecondary graduates.

The research framework also includes two projects that will update and expand benchmarking research undertaken by HEQCO researchers in 2015. The first is an update of [Canadian Postsecondary Performance: Impact 2015](#), a performance and cost analysis for Canadian postsecondary education. In the refreshed approach, an additional layer of analysis will consider Ontario institutions by region. The second benchmarking project is an update of HEQCO's [Still Worth it After All These Years](#), which looks at earnings premiums for Ontario graduates across credential types.

Sustainability and System Design

Financial stability for institutions across the province is an important area of focus. As the pandemic unfolded, institutions expressed particular concerns about the decline in international enrolment; the costs of digital course development and delivery; and IT infrastructure needs. But questions of sustainability have long occupied institutional leaders and policy-makers. HEQCO's plans in this priority area reflect immediate and historical issues, and the ways these are converging in the current environment. As the pandemic continues, research needs to be pursued on the longer-term effects on institutional stability.

Given the ongoing financial concerns for Ontario's postsecondary institutions, HEQCO's work over the next three years will:

- Analyze current and historic strategies for financial sustainability, including internationalization and interinstitutional partnerships.
- Consider postsecondary costs and return on investment.

Current instability concerns highlight the need to focus on the policy frameworks that provide infrastructure in Ontario's postsecondary sector. These policies — differentiation, growth and tuition, for example — have evolved over time and have shaped institutions' operational approaches. HEQCO's work will inform policy related to system sustainability, including levels of funding and differentiated missions to offer a range of credentials.

Given the importance of Ontario's postsecondary policy framework in shaping institutional and sector sustainability, HEQCO's work over the next three years will:

- Consider options in support of Ontario's evolving postsecondary policy context.
- Focus on differentiation, with particular attention on Ontario's Strategic Mandate Agreements and performance-based funding.

Appendix B provides a visual representation of HEQCO's Strategic Research Framework.

The research HEQCO completes over the next three years will extend important conversations regarding access, quality and sustainability. Our research will inform government about the innovative teaching and learning opportunities provided to Ontario's learners; offer new ways of conceptualizing and assessing student learning and skills outcomes; and offer insights related to ensuring equitable access for all students. Our work will inform policy-makers and institutional leaders as they navigate a post-pandemic landscape and work toward a more sustainable system. Insights from our research will work in concert rather than in isolation — understandings in each priority area will inform and enhance the others. Using a range of reporting formats, we hope to engage a variety of stakeholders, including community members, researchers, institutional representatives and government colleagues. Our research will also raise new questions that will inform future strategic research frameworks.

[Additional HEQCO Research activities](#)

HEQCO's work is strengthened through relationships with postsecondary institutions, government/non-profit agencies and community organizations. These relationships assist HEQCO researchers with dissemination of publications, peer review of draft reports, review of research materials such as surveys, and advice regarding publicly available data. External partners may also serve as co-authors on HEQCO publications.

HEQCO anticipates continued engagement with sector partners and stakeholders. We anticipate particular engagement with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities on evaluation projects and other reporting. In 2021, for example, HEQCO will complete evaluations of the OPAIP and Pathways to Education programs. We also expect to continue to provide an annual report on free speech policies in each of the three years of this plan.

The HEQCO research team is also committed to ensuring opportunities for stakeholders and partners to learn about our work. Conference presentations, roundtable discussions and other speaking engagements will allow HEQCO researchers to share information and findings as well as gather feedback from partners across the province.

HEQCO is also committed to providing opportunities for students and recent graduates to develop their professional identities. Through internships and job-shadowing events, HEQCO

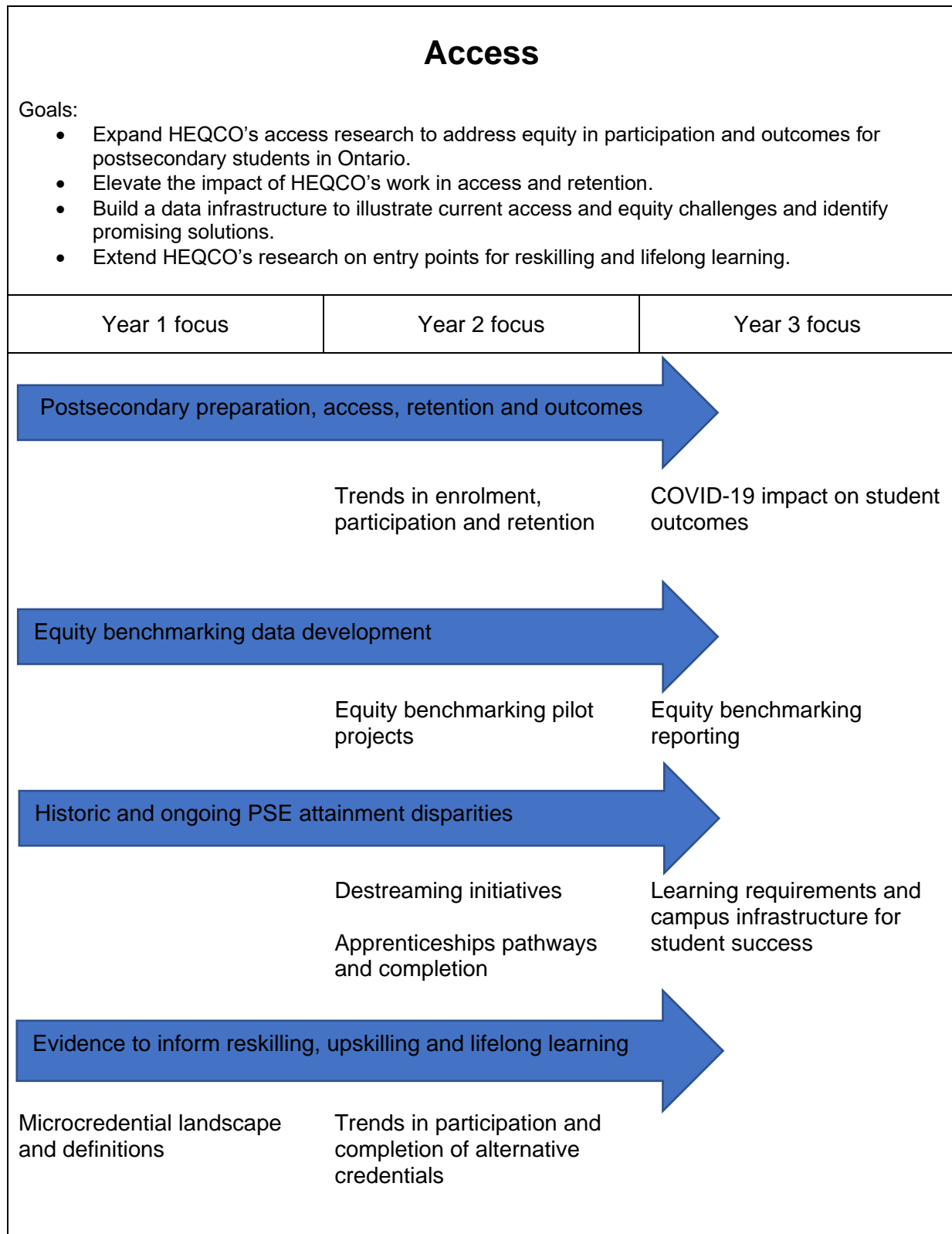
can offer experiential learning activities that will help graduates integrate theory and practice in a work environment. Research interns also bring new perspectives and creative ideas that enhance our work. HEQCO researchers will continue to engage with Ontario's postsecondary institutions to develop internship placements for students across a wide range of programs and disciplines.

Appendix A – Summary of HEQCO Consultations (Fall, 2020)

Organization	Date
President & CEO, Council of Ontario Universities (COU)	Sept. 1
Deputy Minister, Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU)	Sept. 2
Executive Lead/Special Advisor, Strategic Mandate Agreements Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU)	Sept. 15
Principal, Queen's University	Sept. 16
President & CEO, Colleges Ontario (CO)	Sept. 17
Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU)	Sept. 17
Board Chair, Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO)	Sept. 22
Assistant Deputy Minister, Employment & Training Division, Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD)	Sept. 30
President & CEO, Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT)	Oct. 5
Provost, University of Ottawa	Oct. 6
President & CEO, Ontario College Application Service (OCAS)	Oct. 7
Chair, Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV)	Oct. 8
CEO, Contact North	Oct. 13
President & CEO, Hamilton Community Foundation	Oct. 14
Professor, Queen's University	Oct. 16
Executive Director, Ontario Universities' Application Centre (OUAC)	Oct. 19
CEO, Business Higher Education Roundtable (BHER)	Oct. 22
Executive Director and President, Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA)	Oct. 26
CEO, eCampus Ontario	Nov. 2
Director General, Employment and Social Development Canada (ESDC)	Nov. 5

Organization	Date
Deputy Minister and Assistant Deputy Minister, Ministry of Education	Nov. 16
Executive Director, Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA)	Nov. 18
Assistant Deputy Minister, Workforce Policy & Innovation Division, Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development (MLTSD)	Nov. 23
CEO, Polytechnics Canada	Nov. 23
Research Director, Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC)	Dec. 2
Executive Director, People for Education	Dec. 3

Appendix B – Strategic Research Framework Summary



Quality

Goals:

- Expand the impact of HEQCO's work on learning outcomes.
- Further develop HEQCO's understanding and evaluation of teaching and learning environments.
- Build a data infrastructure on the value of postsecondary education in Ontario, with a focus on skills and competencies.

Year 1 focus	Year 2 focus	Year 3 focus
<div> <div>Transformations in digital learning</div> <div> <div>Using learning outcomes to inform curriculum program design</div> <div>Shifts in curriculum and pedagogy impacted by COVID-19</div> </div> </div>		
<div> <div>Skills gap: trends, evidence and impacts</div> <div> <div>Students' skill articulation</div> <div>Transferable skill development in the digital environment</div> </div> </div>		
Work integrated and experiential learning participation and outcomes	Assessing students' learning and skills outcomes	COVID-19 impact on skill development
Performance and cost analysis for Canadian PSE		
<div> <div>Earnings premiums for PSE graduates</div> <div> <div>Value of Ontario credentials for graduates across programs and background characteristics</div> <div> <div>Earnings premiums for post-COVID-19 PSE graduates</div> <div>Effects of employment disruptions on longer term PSE graduate outcomes</div> </div> </div> </div>		

Sustainability and System Design

Goals:

- Explore and critically review the PSE policy context in Ontario to chart a path to the future.
- Promote differentiation as a means to support academic quality and return on investment.
- Review Ontario PSE institutions' financial sustainability and cost structure.

