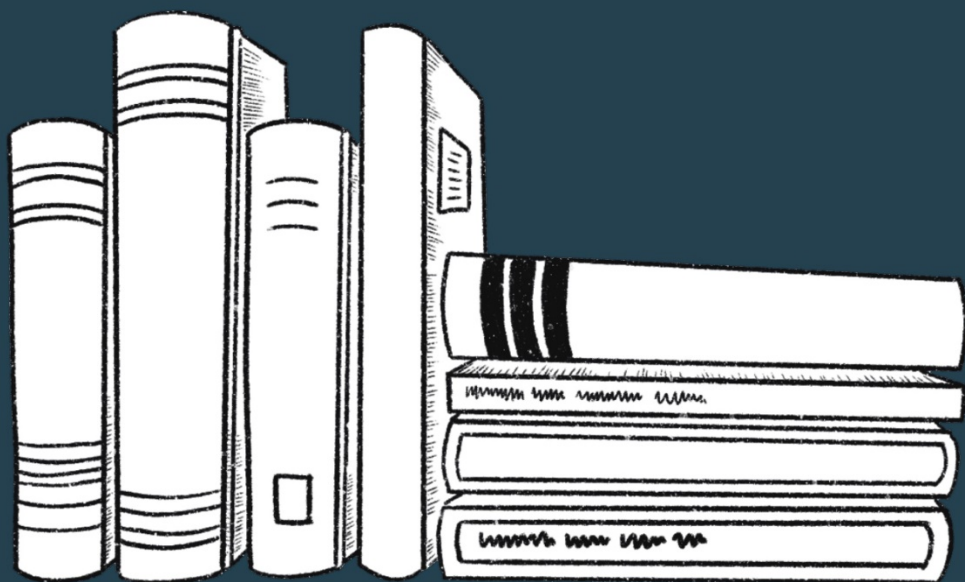


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Who Grants Degrees? An Overview of Ontario's Evolving Credential Landscape

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Introduction

On October 7, 2021, the Ontario government announced the *Supporting People and Businesses Act, 2021*: an omnibus, red tape reduction package containing regulatory and policy changes across ministries. The section relating to the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) focused on improving students' access to high-quality programs that help prepare them for the labour market. Government identified several options toward this goal, including increasing degree-granting caps at Ontario colleges, expanding degree-granting authority and expanding the credentials offered at Ontario colleges to include applied master's degrees.

These options — if government chooses to action them — will have long-term impacts for students, employers and institutions. Adding credentials and expanding degree-granting authority is essentially irreversible. Once new credentials or providers are introduced into the landscape, they are not easily revoked.

The question of college degree expansion in Ontario is not new. Government's first intervention on this issue was the *Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000* (PECEA): one of the most significant changes in Ontario's PSE system since the establishment of the college sector in 1965 (Charles, 2011; Social Research and Demonstration Corporation, 2015). This legislation extended degree granting in Ontario, formerly limited to public universities, to Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (CAATs), in-province private institutions and out-of-province organizations. The PECEA also established the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), which makes recommendations to the Minister of Colleges and Universities on whether to grant consent for degree programs at Ontario colleges and private or out-of-province institutions. Today, current deliberations about expanding college degree granting echo and extend policy discussions that led to the PECEA.

This paper describes the influences that shaped Ontario's credential landscape leading up to the PECEA and serves as an introduction to a series of more focused publications from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) on this important discussion. It explores the factors that influenced government's initial decision to extend degree granting in the college sector and describes how the postsecondary landscape has evolved in the years since. This backdrop provides context for government's current deliberations and points toward future credential-related issues that should be considered in the months and years ahead.

An Overview: The Evolution of Postsecondary Credentials in Ontario

The Ontario government's recent exploration of degree granting centres on postsecondary credentials and the institutions authorized to provide them. Credentials are used within the global PSE sector to organize, define and differentiate between levels of education offered within and across jurisdictions. Distinct credentials are also understood in relation to each other and can structure pathways for student progression. Credentials also certify to employers that an individual has acquired specific skills, attributes or competencies (Tholen, 2019) and are thus valuable to both employers and graduates (Taylor, 2018). New credentials are developed in response to societal, academic and socio-economic drivers. While individual provinces oversee the structure and content of their educational credentials, resources such as the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada [CMEC], 2007) provide a common set of expectations to guide local frameworks. International organizations such as the Lumina Foundation and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have also

developed tools to outline graduate competencies and connections across credential types (Adelman et al, 2014; Lumina Foundation, 2015; EHEA, 2018).

For decades after the introduction of the colleges in 1965, Ontario's credential landscape remained relatively stable and straightforward. CAATs, created by the Robarts Progressive Conservative (PC) government, were designed to provide occupation-oriented credentials and operate separately from universities. CAATs also addressed a progressive vision that emphasized postsecondary opportunities as a vehicle to address social and socioeconomic barriers, particularly for students historically unable to access a university education. While then-Minister of Education Bill Davis supported college graduates' ability to transfer to university in the 1960s, he failed to outline policies that supported this goal. In fact, until the late 1990s, colleges and universities offered distinct credentials with little coordination and no overlap. Universities had a monopoly on degree granting based on independent statutes while colleges offered shorter, hands-on diplomas and certificates that were tied to local labour-market needs.

Pivotaly, the PECEA of 2000 allowed colleges to grant four-year degrees in applied areas of study, ending the clear distinctions between college and university credentials. A variety of factors influenced this shift between the years 1990 and 2000. These factors involved changing economic contexts, shifts in government ideology, PSE enrolment pressures and the advocacy efforts of both the college and university sectors. As part of our overview, the following sections discuss these interconnected factors — leading to the creation of PECEA — then describe major influences in Ontario's PSE landscape since PECEA's degree expansion, including the Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF).

Ontario's Economic Context, 1985–1997

In the early 1990s, the technological revolution and corresponding restructuring of the traditional industrial economy plunged Ontario into a deep recession. The New Democratic government of Bob Rae (1990 to 1995) took office in the worst economic environment Ontario had experienced since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Rae's government adopted a tax-and-spend approach, raising taxes and doubling the provincial debt (Ibbitson, 1997). Between 1985 and 1997, the interest on provincial debt increased from 10% of revenue to 17% (Government of Ontario, 1985; 1997).

Ontario's economic strain mirrored, and was exacerbated by, a challenging federal context. Starting in the mid-1980s, the federal government worked to address the growing national deficit by reducing and restructuring provincial transfer payments in health, education and social services (Lang et al., 2000). Prime Minister Chrétien's 1995 budget included the largest reduction in federal transfers to the provinces in Canadian history — a reduction of about \$2 billion for Ontario (Tombe, 2020). Federal postsecondary transfers decreased by nearly 15% (Fisher et al., 2009). The federal government also reduced funding for labour force development and shifted workforce preparation to the provinces (Fisher et al., 2009), further increasing provincial financial strain related to education and training.

In 1995, Ontario's Progressive Conservatives gained power with a majority government and a reform agenda under Premier Mike Harris. The Harris government set out to reduce the size and role of government, decrease provincial taxes by 30% and cut \$6 billion from the provincial budget through spending decreases (Ibbitson, 1997). In 1996, the budget for Ontario's Ministry of Education and Training was cut by \$400 million; operating grants to Ontario colleges and universities were reduced by more than 15% (\$280 million) (Jones, 1997).

These cuts followed overall funding decreases to Ontario colleges and universities through the 1990s. Per-student funding (i.e., grants and fees) declined across the sectors despite increases in enrolment in the early parts of the decade, which led to a peak in PSE participation rates in 1997 (Snowdon & Associates, 2009; Berger, 2009). Colleges were hit particularly hard in this environment as recession-induced enrolment increases were not supported by adequate grants. Colleges sought opportunities to increase their revenue, which included the development of joint programs and transfer arrangements with universities.

To help PSE institutions recoup some of the revenue lost from funding decreases and cuts, the Harris government allowed tuition increases and more flexibility. The new framework permitted limited deregulation of tuition fees for graduate and some undergraduate programs; professional programs at universities (health and medicine, law and some high-tech programs); and some college programs, including post-diploma and high-demand specialist programs. Tuition for international students was entirely deregulated (Rexe, 2015), and international students were no longer counted in provincial operating grant calculations (Snowdon & Associates, 2009). Under the new framework, government also required institutions set aside 30% of the amount by which fees increased for need-based student aid (Doucet, 2004).

This period of economic hardship and government downsizing accelerated the fiscal transformation of Ontario's PSE institutions that started in the 1980s (MacKay, 2014). Provincial funding as a share of institutional operating revenue declined across all provinces, but the issue was particularly acute in Ontario. For universities, provincial grants as a proportion of operating revenue decreased from 80% in 1980 to 60% in 1997. Grant funding for colleges decreased from 85% of total operating revenue in 1992¹ to 74% in 1997 (Snowdon & Associates, 2009).² Funding cuts in the mid-1990s further reduced the provincial government's share of PSE operating revenue and secured Ontario's position as last in per-student funding among the provinces (MacKay, 2014; Fisher et al., 2009). Tuition as a share of operating revenue in Ontario increased from 22% to 38% as institutions began to rely more heavily on tuition fees to balance their budgets.

Government postsecondary policies of this era were used to drive economic prosperity; institutions not only had a mission to educate the workforce of the future, but to be economic engines in their local communities. This vision had long roots — going back to the Economic Council of Canada in the 1960s and federal investments to support baby boom expansion and through the 1980s with new federal research funding. The Ontario Jobs Investment Board, established in 1997, reemphasized these ideas with a focus on 'innovation culture,' infrastructure for competitiveness and preparing people for jobs (Ontario Jobs Investment Board, 1998). Funding shifts that changed the balance between higher education as a personal investment versus a public good pushed the emphasis on labour markets and the workforce into new territory: Student tuition became a key driver, and financing source, for economic development in Ontario.

Shifts in Government Ideology and Visions of Education

¹ College enrolment and funding data before 1992 is not available (Snowdon & Associates, 2009).

² Provincial operating grants have increased in absolute terms but decreased in relative terms. See: Snowdon & Associates, 2009.

The Harris government's economic agenda reflected a neoliberal ideology that emerged in higher education in the 1970s and established a global foothold in the 1980s (Neave, 1988). Neoliberal policies tie higher education to economic factors, while more progressive policies — including those that provided foundation for Ontario's PSE sector — conceive of higher education as a social good (Neave, 1988). This is illustrated by the shift from PSE being viewed as a public responsibility, with most funding provided through government grants, to PSE as a private enterprise marked by high tuition fees. The federal government reinforced these ideas through cuts to provincial transfer payments followed by targeted reinvestments in educational tax credits, the Canada Education Savings Grant and the Millennium Scholarship Foundation, as well as changes to the Registered Education Savings Plans (RESP) program. These federal savings and funding opportunities offered public support for individual students rather than institutional operating grants delivered through provincial governments.

A report from Ontario's Advisory Panel on Future Directions for Postsecondary Education (1996) reflected and amplified the neoliberal perspective through its recommendations related to deregulation, accountability and performance assessment. The report also emphasized entrepreneurship, access and choice: for example, Recommendation 10 advised that government-defined catchment areas for colleges should be "abandoned" (p. 42) to ensure that institutions have the tools to meet the needs of a knowledge-based society.³ Catchment areas were part of colleges' original mandate to focus on local communities. The Advisory report described catchments as inflexible and constraining with respect to competition — and with higher tuition rates, institutions had to find opportunities to distinguish their programs and attract students.

This policy orientation motivated many postsecondary legislative and funding actions during the Harris era. Tuition flexibility and deregulation are important examples; other examples include funding mechanisms that encouraged inter-institutional competition and differentiation. In the university sector, the Harris government extended "matching grant" programs to encourage private sector engagement in research (Jones, 2004). By raising private dollars, universities could compete for matching funds. Capital improvements supported through the SuperBuild Program and the Access to Opportunity Programs (ATOP) also used a matching funds approach (Robertson, McGrane & Shaker, 2003). Under ATOP, institutions could raise private funds to secure support for new spaces in high-demand program areas such as information technology. As a further incentive, institutions were free to set their own tuition levels for these programs (Jones, 2004). Matching funds programs incentivized competition within and across institutions and disadvantaged newer and smaller schools that had less extensive networks that could be tapped for fundraising (Doucet, 2004).

The Harris government also prioritized accountability by introducing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) at colleges and universities. KPIs are neoliberal mechanisms in that they focus on the connection between graduates and the labour market. In 1998, universities began to report on graduation rates by program, graduate employment rates and OSAP default rates (Chan, 2015). Colleges had five KPIs: student satisfaction, graduate satisfaction, graduation rate, graduate employment rate and employer satisfaction (Northern College, n.d.). KPIs were later used to determine a small portion of each institution's operating grant.

Ontario's Enrolment Increases: The Double Cohort

³ Catchment areas were formally dissolved under the *Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002*.

In 1999, the Harris government launched a new four-year high school curriculum for university-bound students and phased out the five-year Ontario Academic Credits program (OAC, or Grade 13). Beginning in 1985, provincial governments aimed to revise secondary curriculums, but reform was not realized until the Harris years (Anderson & Ben Jaafar, 2003). The new curriculum was introduced one year at a time, resulting in a “double cohort” of OAC and Grade 12 high school graduates and first-year entrants to PSE in the fall of 2003 (Winton & Jones, 2015).

Because the reform was phased in, government and institutions had time to consider the possible impacts on enrolment. In consultations with colleges and universities, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) developed a participation model based on the 18-to-24-year-old population and double cohort projections. The goal was to ensure that there would be a space for all interested and qualified students. Initial projections estimated an overall enrolment increase of 88,000 students in the fall of 2003, with 30,000 students expected in the college sector and 58,000 in the university sector. This projection was later adjusted to more than 100,000 new students.

Government acknowledged the need for further investments to accommodate these projected enrolment increases in its 1999 budget, initially with the announcement of new capital funding through its SuperBuild program. Over the following three years, government announced additional capital funding and commitments for increases in operating funds (MTCU, 2000; 2002; 2004). Allocations were divided across the sectors according to historic enrolment patterns — university enrolments generally represent about 66% of overall PSE enrolment in Ontario, and college enrolments represent about 34%.

University and college applications increased dramatically for the fall of 2003: Applications⁴ for students applying to university directly from high school rose 84%, and college applications increased for both direct-from-high-school (10%) and non-direct (17.5%) applicants (Ontario Universities Application Centre, 2004; Winton & Jones, 2015). These application increases reflect double cohort pressures and the concurrent growth in the 18-to-24-year-old population traditionally associated with entry to PSE. In addition, overall participation rates in Ontario climbed as more Ontarians viewed higher education as necessary for employment. Growth hit the university sector particularly hard: In fall 2002, the year before the double cohort, universities saw a 16% increase in applicants. The overall increase in applicants between 2001 and 2003 was nearly 70% (Winton & Jones, 2015; Doucet, 2004). Universities responded by prioritizing direct-from-high-school applicants over mature applicants or those transferring from another institution.

Government allocations in the preparation for the double cohort had far-reaching impacts with different implications for the sectors. While enrolment flow changed for both colleges and universities, the impact was greater for universities (King & Warren, 2006). Students enrolled in the final Grade 13 cohort were more likely to be university-bound. The curriculum revision for Grade 12 students, that year and going forward, meant that more students would meet university admission requirements. It also resulted in a decrease in the high school five-year (or fewer than five years) graduation rate from 78% to 68%, which disproportionately affected college-bound students (King & Warren, 2006). Spaces added via SuperBuild did not account for these outcomes and proved difficult for colleges to fill. In response to unfilled spaces, colleges began to advocate for opportunities to expand their program offerings — including new credentials, which could be used to attract new students.

⁴ Between 2002 and 2003, the number of applicants to universities increased by 47% (OUAC, 2004).

College and University Advocacy Strategies

Ontario's current credential landscape also reflects successful college and university advocacy strategies during the 1990s, which were shaped by the economic, ideological and enrolment realities of the pre-PECEA era. The college sector's advocacy strategy was based on a series of reviews and task forces, including the *Vision 2000: Quality and Opportunity* (1990) review of the college mandate and the Task Force on Advanced Training's (1993) report, *No Dead Ends*.⁵ These reports catalyzed cooperative efforts between colleges and universities to ensure students would have a pathway to advanced credentials, but action stalled because of economic and political tumult. The College-University Consortium Council launched in 1996 as a voluntary consortium of institutions particularly interested in credit transfer (Trick, 2013). Ultimately, all universities agreed to participate, but progress was slow.

In 1999, the Port Hope Accord (formally called the Ontario College-University Degree Completion Accord) offered principles and a framework to support transfer agreements between colleges and universities. As with earlier efforts, recommendations from the Accord rolled out very slowly, despite receiving general support from universities (Skolnik, 2005). University reticence reflected their comfort with the binary structure of Ontario PSE, but also the realities of the era: University attention was occupied by SuperBuild, the double cohort, tuition deregulation and ongoing funding concerns.

Meanwhile, colleges began to push for degree-granting authority. Expanding degree-granting had two aims: to support access to degree programs for more Ontario students in the absence of clear pathways between colleges and universities; and to provide new opportunities for enrolment and tuition. These goals are still present in Colleges Ontario (CO) advocacy. Since the early 2010s, CO has also advocated for the introduction of three-year baccalaureate degrees and applied master's degrees. Colleges' re-engagement with these issues in recent years has coincided with the election of the Ford PC government in 2018. In its 2020 white paper, *The Future of Ontario's Workers*, CO advocated for three-year baccalaureate degrees by arguing that these programs would enrich the career opportunities for students, meet employers' demands for degree-holding workers and attract more international students to study in Ontario (StrategyCorp Institute of Public Policy and Economy, 2020). These arguments reinforce the notion of higher education as a key driver of a flourishing labour market. They privilege notions of student demand and expanded choice.

The university sector took a different approach to influencing the policy landscape during the 1990s. While college advocacy focused on credentials, universities focused on tuition flexibility as a means of supporting the sector's financial stability and enhancing the quality of university education (Rexe, 2015; McDowell, 2016). Even before Queen's Park permitted some flexibility and deregulation in 1996, universities advocated for phased-in tuition hikes balanced by increases in student aid (McDowell, 2016). Some cost-recovery programs were already in place at universities (for example, MBA programs). Universities later pressed for full deregulation of tuition, including for undergraduate programs (McDowell, 2016). Queen's University's *Pathfinder Program for Ontario Universities* (2001), for example, argued that with tuition increases, institutions could enhance the quality of the learning environment, embrace new technologies and expand student financial supports (McKarney, 2002). To further ensure affordability and access, universities supported the federal government's Millennium Foundation program and educational tax credits.

⁵ This report is commonly referred to as the Pitman Report, after its author, Walter G. Pitman.

Universities also successfully advocated for federal government support for their research mandate. In 2000, the Chrétien government launched the Canada Research Chair (CRC) program to address the ‘brain drain’ of Canadian talent (Greenfield, 2021). In 2008, the launch of the Canada Excellence Research Chairs program further developed Canada’s reputation as a global leader in research and innovation. These awards — either \$4 million or \$8 million over eight years — are still among the most prestigious and generous available globally. Between 1990 and 2005, federal and provincial research and development expenditures increased dramatically, with both investments nearly quadrupling (federal increased from \$285 million to \$997 million, and provincial increased from \$118 million to \$402 million) (Statistics Canada, 2002).

Differences between college and university advocacy strategies reflect a long-standing divide in Ontario’s higher education system (Harmsen & Tupper, 2017). However, these strategies also reveal a common theme of desire for prestige across both sectors during the 1990s and 2000s and underscore the competitive environment created by neoliberal government policy and priorities. Ambitious colleges hoped to enhance local economies by delivering degree programs that met the needs of employers and improved access for students seeking a baccalaureate degree. Universities, who were comfortable as the undisputed providers of baccalaureate programming, focused on expanding graduate programming and research portfolios. Both sectors worked to solidify and expand their positions in the PSE landscape.

Competition and positioning in Ontario’s PSE sector extended with the PECEA because of the introduction of a new class of institution: the Institutes of Technology and Advanced Learning (ITAL), which are authorized to provide a greater proportion of their programming at the bachelor’s degree level than CAATs. PSE competition is now inter- and intra-sectoral, resulting in less stability and sustainability. In the current funding environment, credentials are not simply the currency of the labour market or a packaging of educational experiences: They are also institutional tools for revenue generation, differentiation and prestige.

Ontario’s Postsecondary Landscape since PECEA

The factors outlined above continue to shape Ontario postsecondary policy and priorities. Primary themes from the years leading up to the PECEA — PSE system sustainability, accountability and efficiency — carried forward into two Liberal governments (2003 to 2018) and the current PC government (2018 to present). With the establishment of the Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF), and the quality assurance (QA) processes that support it, Ontario’s PSE landscape continues to evolve.

System sustainability was a major focus of the 2005 *Postsecondary Education Review*, which was commissioned early in Premier Dalton McGuinty’s Liberal government. Led by former NDP Premier Bob Rae, the review offered 28 recommendations to balance the goals of a high-quality, accessible, efficient and sustainable postsecondary system in Ontario (Lennon et al., 2015). Much of the report focused on institutional revenue and recommended increases in per-student and base funding (Lennon et al., 2015). The report also highlighted the importance of system design in supporting quality and access and renewed the call for cooperation and credit transfer between colleges and universities (Rae, 2005). Six years after Rae’s recommendation (by 2011), the College-University Consortium Council (CUCC) evolved into the Ontario Council on Articulation and Transfer (ONCAT). To date, more than 750 agreements have been formalized for diploma/advanced diploma to degree program pathways.

Reaching Higher: The McGuinty Government Plan for Postsecondary Education responded to the Rae-led report and allocated an additional \$1.6 billion in operating grants along with funding for enrolment spaces (MTCU, 2005).⁶ With new investments in 2007 and 2008, operating funding in Ontario reached its highest per-student level. However, these gains were only temporary. Ontario's expenditures per full-time equivalent (FTE) student in 2019-20 were again the lowest in Canada (Usher, 2021). Ontario's FTE expenditure is currently "so low that it drags down the national average" such that every other jurisdiction is "above average" (Usher, 2021, p. 36). In terms of overall revenue per FTE, Ontario is on par with other provinces and the average for Canada (Usher, 2022). Revenue from tuition and fees helps bring Ontario up to this average.

In recent years, Ontario's provincial governments have used non-investment tools to address PSE system quality and efficiency. KPIs, which resurfaced in both the Rae-led review and *Reaching Higher*, have been used to promote accountability and articulate institutional performance. *Reaching Higher* established the Multi-year Accountability Agreements (MYAAs) (2006–2010), which were followed by the first Strategic Mandate Agreements, or SMAs (2014–2017). In 2013, the Liberal government released Ontario's *Differentiation Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education*. The framework's goal was to support student access, solidify and build upon the strengths of Ontario's institutions while reducing duplication and maintain a financially sustainable system (MTCU, 2013). Government later advanced this agenda through updated Strategic Mandate Agreements (2017–2020). These accountability frameworks tied only a very small proportion of funding to performance indicators.

The most recent SMAs (2020–2025) brought a sharper focus on institutional performance with a clear emphasis on the labour market. The agreements require reporting on 10 metrics, including students' skill development, graduate employment rate, graduate earnings and institutional economic impact. The metrics will be attached to 60% of government funding when the agreements are fully implemented in 2025⁷ — a dramatic increase in funding tied to performance, which was 1.2% for colleges and 1.4% for universities in earlier SMAs. These new SMA agreements, in form and focus, advance the philosophical shift from education as a social project to education as an economic driver (Spooner, 2019).

Changes introduced in the PECEA also required the development of the Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF) and its attendant QA system. The OQF provided some clarity and transparency in a landscape that had earlier relied on clear distinctions between credential providers; new processes were needed to ensure the quality of new degree programs introduced in the college sector. Both the OQF and the QA system represented significant institutional and government investment.

The Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF)

The [Ontario Qualifications Framework \(OQF\)](#) was developed by the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), a government agency established by the PECEA to operationalize government's expansion of degree-granting authority to public colleges and private and out-of-province institutions. The Framework provides high-level descriptions and minimum standards for all postsecondary credentials offered in Ontario by public universities, CAATs, private career colleges, Indigenous Institutes and other institutions authorized by the Minister of Colleges and Universities.⁸ Credentials vary in terms of what type of institution can offer them, admission requirements, typical

⁶ *Reaching Higher* called for a total of \$6.2 billion in new investments by 2009-10.

⁷ Implementation of funding tied to performance was suspended in the pandemic.

⁸ The OQF does not include religious postsecondary programs.

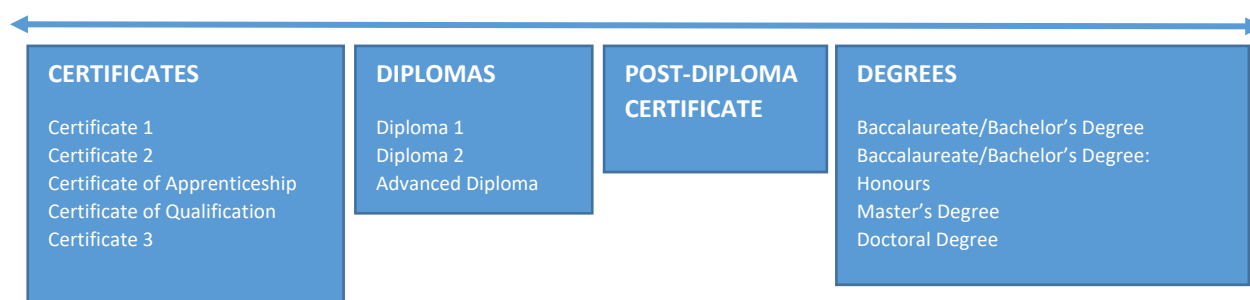
duration and preparation for employment — that is, who can access which programs, how quickly students can graduate and enter the labour market and what kinds of jobs graduates are best prepared for. Qualification Standards included in the OQF focus on the knowledge and skills graduates should carry into the workplace or their further studies. In this way, the OQF is learner-centred rather than focused on institutions, programs or disciplines.

The OQF supports government’s goals related to access and accountability. It supports access to postsecondary education in Ontario by providing students clear information about available credentials and minimum admissions criteria. This information helps clarify pathways available for entry into and transitions across credentials. The Framework also promotes accountability by describing the purposes and learning expectations for each qualification.

Qualifications are arranged by level or “type” of knowledge, with programs ranging from “mastery of particular, established bodies of knowledge and skill” to “levels at the frontiers of knowledge where new knowledge is created and established assumptions and methods are challenged” (OQF, 2019). Each qualification can be viewed as a point on this continuum. This organization reflects the cumulative, incremental and integrative nature of learning itself (Adelman et al., 2014). Figure 1 divides the different qualifications under the headings of certificates, diplomas, post-diploma certificates and degrees.

Figure 1

Ontario Postsecondary Education Qualifications as a Continuum



Note: Adapted from the Ontario Qualifications Framework

As a map of the credential landscape, the OQF’s value is greater than the sum of its parts. The OQF offers a significant degree of clarity regarding the defining features of individual credentials as well as an overview of their relationships. All credentials are best understood in context, with a clear articulation of how competencies build from one credential to the next. The Framework also serves as a centralized and transparent source of information for employers within Ontario and beyond.



Quality Assurance Mechanisms for the OQF

Ontario's QA processes support the integrity of the OQF and the individual credentials included in the Framework. The OQF outlines the competencies for each credential: breadth and depth of knowledge, conceptual and methodological awareness, communication skills, application of knowledge and professional autonomy. The competencies for baccalaureate and honours baccalaureate degrees are also articulated as "[Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations](#)."

Four separate and distinct bodies address and assess program quality in Ontario. The Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) oversees college certificates, diplomas and advanced diploma programs; the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council) oversees university baccalaureate, honours baccalaureate, master's and doctoral degree programs offered by Ontario universities; PEQAB oversees college degree programs (baccalaureate and honours baccalaureate), as well as degree programs offered by private institutions, universities based in other jurisdictions, and some other institutions operating in Ontario; and the Indigenous Advanced Education and Skills Council (IAESC) has established quality assurance standards for Indigenous Institutes in Ontario. Under this arrangement, different agencies are responsible for the assessment of baccalaureate degrees depending on which institution is offering the program. Having different agencies assessing the same credential introduces risks of variability and inconsistency.

In recent years, shifts in program nomenclature have disrupted the stability of the OQF and raised questions about the distinctions between different baccalaureate degrees. For example, in 2009, PEQAB dropped the requirement that all four-year baccalaureate degrees offered by colleges be identified as "applied" — a requirement initially outlined in the PECEA (PECEA, 2000, s 4(5)(a)). Beginning in 2015, colleges were permitted to use the term "honours" to describe baccalaureate programming. This distinction had previously been prohibited on the grounds that applied degrees were not eligible for research-oriented nomenclature or the honours designation (PEQAB, 2016).

In 2016, PEQAB removed some of the standards required in the ministerial consent process that supported system differentiation. The "non-duplication of programs" and "economic need" standards were in place to ensure that college degrees were not duplicates of programs normally offered by universities and that they were designed to meet an identified economic or labour market need (PEQAB, 2016, p. 31–32). With these changes in name and program uniqueness, college and university degrees have become less distinct over the past decade.

Ontario's credential landscape has been further complicated by a blurring of program-level distinctions. While colleges have pushed to expand degree granting, universities have embraced professional and applied programming and features such as work-integrated learning, which are traditionally elements of industry-facing college programs. Despite (or because of) this convergence with respect to programming, transparent, consistent and seamless student mobility across the sectors is still a challenge. A recurring element of CO's advocacy are vertical transfer pathways — opportunities for college students to transfer easily from diploma/certificate programs to bachelor's degrees, or to continue into graduate studies following the completion of a college bachelor's degree. But aside from supporting ONCAT's establishment in 2011, government has done little to incentivize better collaboration for student mobility. Extending degree granting through the PECEA served as a disincentive for collaborations to enhance student mobility and progression. In the continued absence of

well-defined pathways into graduate studies, colleges have proposed to build their own: CO's *The Future of Ontario's Workers* advocates for flexibility to offer applied master's degrees.

Looking Forward: Informing Government Decisions on Degree Granting in Ontario

Government decisions regarding expanded degree granting are situated in a complex yet familiar environment. Government has focused on the priorities of access, accountability and efficiency; institutions have been preoccupied by chronic funding challenges. Funding instability is ultimately passed down to students and families: Ontario students pay well above the national average for tuition and fees (Statistics Canada, 2021). Ontario is also marked by a significant gap — both structural and cultural — between the primary providers of credentials: colleges and universities. This gap between sectors is reinforced by current QA processes, with separate agencies assessing bachelor's degree programs according to institution type. At the same time, college and university programming has converged beyond mere credentials offered; both sectors are focused on labour market preparation in response to government accountability structures and student and employer priorities. Perhaps remarkably, given this challenging context, Ontario's postsecondary participation rates are among the highest in the world.⁹

A review of evolving challenges in Ontario's postsecondary landscape point toward two issues that warrant exploration as part of degree expansion decisions: costs and labour market needs. These issues are tied to government priorities of efficiency and accountability, and they are central concerns for all stakeholders. An expansion of degree granting at Ontario colleges should be affordable for government, institutions and students. And new degree granting should be aligned with labour market needs and employer expectations. With this paper serving as an overview and introduction, HEQCO will address the following questions with two additional reports:

- What are the costs (to government, institutions and students) of credential expansion?
- What do student enrolment and employment outcomes indicate about the alignment or gaps between Ontario's credential landscape and the labour market?

These questions are tied to current decisions about who offers degrees in Ontario, but they are also relevant when considering the quality and sustainability of Ontario's PSE system today and into the future.

⁹ Statistics Canada. Table 37-10-0130-01, Educational attainment of the population aged 25 to 64, by age group and sex, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Canada, provinces and territories.
<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=3710013001>. Released 2021-11-01

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