

Higher Education
Quality Council
of Ontario



An agency of the Government of Ontario

Conseil ontarien
de la qualité de
l'enseignement supérieur

Un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

2024–2027 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

Continuously pursue 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. By remaining attentive to emerging trends, HEQCO has the agility to pursue promising new avenues of research as opportunities arise.

Engage with leaders and practitioners 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. HEQCO’s global perspective on higher education research, policy and practice brings the best ideas, findings and insights to Ontario. Many of Ontario’s postsecondary education (PSE) challenges are shared by jurisdictions across Canada and worldwide.

Communicate with our audiences in accessible and meaningful ways: HEQCO contributes to the effective movement of evidence-based solutions into policy development and best practice, through understandable and direct communication. To help bridge the gap between complex research knowledge and its active use in the PSE sector, HEQCO’s work is written in an accessible style and publicly available.

Advocate for data collection and transparency: HEQCO is an advocate for a more transparent, open and holistic approach to higher education data and data sharing, in partnership with educational institutions, organizations and governments. Data is the lifeblood of evidence-based policy decision-making and HEQCO will continue to seek out solutions to the significant and persistent data gaps that exist at both the provincial and national level.

Recognize that accountability is a foundational tool for system improvement: HEQCO explores system design models across the globe to improve postsecondary access and quality in Ontario.

Respond 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 (MCU).

Be 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 — Message from HEQCO’s President and CEO

The Ontario’s postsecondary education system is at an important crossroad and its future will be determined in large part by the government’s response to recommendations contained in the blue-ribbon panel report on postsecondary education financial sustainability. The decisions taken will impact institutions’ fiscal positions, enrolment decisions, student supports, student experience and research capabilities for the foreseeable future. The HEQCO business and research plan for this cycle anticipates the opportunity to evaluate the outcome of this important process on system sustainability, student body composition, student success and experience.

For a sector that is often portrayed as moving at a glacial pace, massive changes are occurring on all fronts of all Ontario PSE campuses. For example, the sector is adapting to rapidly evolving technology on many fronts. Artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming part of everyday life and is transforming all aspects of college and university activities, including student recruitment, teaching and learning, assessment and research. Employers are expecting graduates with skills to navigate this new reality. The reliance on international student fees to subsidize institutional operations has led to the unprecedented growth of international students. Satellite campus partnerships between Ontario colleges and private career colleges are now commonplace and some institutions now enrol more international students than domestic students. Labour market needs play an increasingly prominent role in the discourse of the sector. From defining the jobs of the future, to evaluating demographic trends in the development of new programming, to defining the skills that graduates need to take to the market, our sector is dealing with these issues in real time. In this environment, HEQCO research into the state of Ontario’s PSE system to support good policy is more important than ever.

The current state of research-quality data is a challenge and obstacle to advancing work in a timely way. Ontario’s fragmented PSE data landscape and lack of willingness to share data that should be publicly accessible limits the work and insights that research can provide to the sector. Government currently has the tools it needs to create the datasets required to examine student pathways from K-12 through PSE and into the labour market. These data are not being used effectively or efficiently. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the Ministry to increase access to important data sets. Conducting focused, impactful research into student success, quality and sustainability requires up-to-date, easily accessible data.

Since 2005, HEQCO has supported an Ontario postsecondary system that ensures a high-quality student experience; is more sustainable; and offers equitable access for all students and our new 2024–2027 research framework (Appendix 3) is an opportunity to assist the government and institutions in meeting the complex challenges facing the

future of the system. This research framework recognizes those complexities and responds with a focus on actionable research to create the best possible policy solutions. HEQCO will continue to support government's efforts around system access, student success and system sustainability by conducting research on important topics of the day.

Thank you to our Board of Directors for their continued guidance and ongoing support in delivering our mandate to the government and citizens of Ontario.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Janice M. Deakin', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Janice M. Deakin, PhD, ICD.D — President and CEO

Environmental Scan

Government Priorities for Agencies

As part of the government of Ontario, agencies are expected to act in the best interests of Ontarians by being efficient, being effective and providing value for money to taxpayers. As outlined in HEQCO's 2023 Annual Letter of Direction, agencies are directed to focus on:

1. **Competitiveness, Sustainability and Expenditure Management**

HEQCO established indicators to ensure responsible, sustainable, efficient, transparent and accountable operation within our financial allocation. Business systems designed specifically for a remote environment have improved efficiencies and allowed HEQCO to effectively control expenditures. One of HEQCO's performance metrics is to deliver HEQCO's mandate within the annual operating budget while maximizing mobilization of funding for research purposes (see Appendix 1).

2. **Governance: Transparency and Accountability**

Our Skills Matrix identifies the current strengths of the existing Board Members and assists the Minister in the recruitment of Board Members with the knowledge and experience needed to support the Board's oversight role. The Skills Matrix also identifies the areas of expertise considered important by the Board to support their work in agency governance and accountability. The Board Member Skills Matrix is provided to the Minister when an upcoming Board vacancy is expected.

3. **Governance: Risk Management**

In 2020, HEQCO introduced the use of a Risk Heat Map to monitor on a quarterly basis the key risk factors for agency operations in addition to the annual agency risk assessment. The Risk Heat Map is presented to the Audit Committee and the Board each quarter with updated mitigation strategies and actions taken to ensure timely and appropriate risk management (see Appendix 2).

4. **Workforce Management**

HEQCO continues to train and support our employees in both accessibility needs and accessible public service delivery. HEQCO has maintained its current full-time equivalent (FTE) staffing level in the 2023/24 cycle and utilized fixed term contract employment to manage staffing levels through periods of statutory leaves including parental leave obligations. Through the virtual agency model, we continue to expand the geographic footprint of our workforce well beyond the Toronto core. In 2023 HEQCO received confirmation of the agency's exemption from the Community Jobs Initiative.

5. Diversity and Inclusion

Equity of access has been a pillar of HEQCO's research agenda since the agency was founded and the new research framework extends this work with an expanded view of access to include language to encompass student opportunities and successes. HEQCO incorporated equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) as well as accessibility support training into its professional development programs for all staff to encourage an equitable and diverse workplace.

6. Data Collection

HEQCO's work highlights the importance of data access and quality. Ontario's PSE system is the largest in Canada, but it lags other jurisdictions in data quality and availability. Conducting high-quality research to explore student success, quality and sustainability requires up-to-date, easily accessible data. Our work leverages partnerships and existing datasets: Statistics Canada, MCU and institutional, where available. We continue our work with MCU to streamline a request process under our Data Sharing Agreement. We will also press MCU to provide ongoing access to enrolment files compiled by the Ministry for PSE institutions.

7. Digital Delivery and Customer Service

Like many other workplaces, HEQCO pivoted to remote operation due to the pandemic and continues to operate as a virtual workplace. The shift to remote operation increased efforts to deliver services digitally, where possible, and explore new possibilities for stakeholder engagement, partnerships and research opportunities. HEQCO staff continue to embrace knowledge mobilization in the virtual space and all public HEQCO material is available digitally in accessible formats for both official languages.

Government Priorities for HEQCO

The Ontario government invested in several postsecondary education elements in the 2023 budget, including health human resources, microcredentials, work-integrated learning (WIL) and the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant. Following the blue-ribbon panel report to the Ministry, more attention will be paid to how better forecasting can inform planning and decision-making. In HEQCO's 2023 Annual Letter of Direction, three projects were identified to be included as part of the research plan:

1. **Enrolment Projections and Population Demographics** – This project will examine enrolment projections, with a particular focus on domestic students. Using relevant data from MCU as well as the Ministry of Finance, HEQCO will work with the ministry to examine demographic trends and their potential impact to the postsecondary system in Ontario.
2. **Part-Time College Enrolment** – This project will provide a more complete understanding of part-time students at Ontario colleges. As specified in HEQCO's Annual Letter of Direction, this project will examine the current profile of part-time college learners, including course loads, time to credential and enrolment pathways. HEQCO will also provide a review of the current part-time funding model.
3. **Campus Free Speech Policy** – HEQCO will continue in its role of reporting on the ongoing implementation of the province's campus free speech policy.

Research Framework: 2024–2027

HEQCO's 2024–2027 research framework (Appendix 3) provides an overview of the context and issues that shape Ontario's PSE landscape and our work. It signals our commitment to short-term, emerging concerns as well as long-term priorities.

This framework reflects HEQCO's values and mandate: to deliver independent, accessible and high-quality research that is responsive to government and sector priorities. It also renews our commitment to the priorities that have long guided HEQCO's work while evolving our definitions of them. The 2024–2027 research framework updates HEQCO's priorities in the following ways:

- We signal the importance of a broader understanding of access by shifting our language to encompass student opportunities and successes. Access typically refers to the beginning of a student's PSE journey; research, policy and sector priority must also focus on persistence, graduation and pathways to the labour market. We are considering options for terminology to best reflect our commitment to these issues.
- We add a new data priority. Our work highlights the importance of data access and quality. Ontario's PSE system is the largest in Canada, but it lags behind other jurisdictions in data quality and availability. Conducting high-quality research to explore student success, quality and sustainability requires up-to-date, easily accessible data. Ontario's fragmented PSE data landscape and lack of willingness to share what should be publicly accessible limits the work and insights that research can provide to the sector.

Research Themes: 2024–2027

Five themes will guide the development of new projects and initiatives:

Internationalization

Internationalization in PSE is a broad concept that includes research partnerships, faculty recruitment, curriculum, programming and student mobility. Recent policy decisions by both the federal and provincial governments to fill gaps in the labour market and generate institutional revenue resulted in a dramatic and ongoing increase in the recruitment of international students to Canada — specifically in Ontario. Research is needed to explore the intersections of PSE, immigration pathways and labour market gaps.

System Composition

Changes in Ontario’s PSE landscape may increase access and success for students, but there is limited public data available to explore outcomes for students enrolled in Indigenous Institutes, private institutions, private career colleges (PCCs) and public college-private partnerships (PCPPs). Research is needed to outline a more sustainable architecture for Ontario’s PSE landscape.

Student Experience

Student experiences and outcomes are shaped by individual background characteristics; family income, disability, immigration status and K-12 performance impact student pathways into and through PSE. Student experiences are also influenced by institutional characteristics, programming and services. Ontario colleges and universities continuously invest in innovative teaching and learning resources and supports to ensure all students have opportunities for success. These investments are at risk in Ontario’s constrained funding environment. Research is needed to explore student experiences and outcomes in the current funding and policy environment.

Accountability and Performance

The Ontario government established a system for accountability, transparency and performance in the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs). The SMA metrics serve as a tool for government to drive sector activity on high-priority initiatives. Our work will explore accountability and performance both broadly and with specific focus on the current SMAs. Research will help illuminate the impact of SMAs on institutional behaviours and system quality. Projects will also explore the relationships between financial sustainability, accountability and government policy.

PSE's Alignment with the Labour Market

In Ontario, government's focus on the labour market can explicitly be seen in funding opportunities and SMA accountabilities. The touchpoints between PSE and the labour market need renewed examination and planning. Research is needed to explore how government policy and PSE programming align with trends and opportunities in the labour market.

Current Projects

Skills Consortium *winter 2024*

HEQCO established a Skills Consortium to explore effective ways to teach essential skills. Through a request for proposal process, seven institutional projects with a focus on innovations or interventions relating to the acquisition, development and/or articulation of transferable skills were selected. A final summary on these projects will focus on lessons learned from consortium projects and reflections on the improvement of teaching and assessing transferable skills.

School-to-work Transitions *winter 2024*

The benefits of postsecondary education are well established, but they are not experienced equally. The transition from school to work can be a particular challenge for some students. Using a combination of federal data and survey responses, this project will examine student experiences in preparing for and transitioning into the labour market.

Postsecondary Persistence in the Pandemic *winter 2024*

Building on the recent data sharing agreement between the Ministry of Colleges and Universities and HEQCO, this project expands the understanding of factors that affected Ontario students' PSE persistence during the pandemic. The analysis will focus on persistence outcomes according to students' age, course delivery formats and overall sense of wellness.

Exploring the Potential of Microcredentials *winter 2024*

This project builds on HEQCO's lifelong learning work and our effort to make sense of Ontario's microcredential landscape. It specifically focuses on the role of microcredentials in Ontario's higher education system. In addition to an extensive literature review, the project relies on interviews with representatives from Ontario postsecondary institutions, research and quality assurance bodies, as well as representatives from governments and institutions outside of Ontario. The report will include recommendations for government and institutions to consider as they make strategic decisions about microcredentials.

PSE Non-completers in Ontario *spring 2024*

This project is being pursued in partnership with the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and focuses on the characteristics and labour market outcomes of those who enrol in an Ontario PSE program but do not persist to graduation ("non-completers"). The work will complement recent HEQCO research focused on graduate outcomes for Ontario credential holders and will extend HEQCO's work on access. The issue of outcomes for non-completers is also an important public policy issue;

governments and students invest in postsecondary education, and it is important to understand the outcomes of students who may not fully benefit from a return on their investments.

Confederation College's Indigenous Knowledge Implementation Packsack *spring 2024*

Continuing the work of Confederation College's Learning Outcomes Assessment Consortium project, this initiative is focused on sharing best practices, tools and advice for embedding Indigenous Learning Outcomes throughout the learning process.

Strategic Mandate Agreement Outcomes *summer 2024*

Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) have been in place between the Ontario Government and the province's colleges and universities for close to 10 years. The most recent agreements are aligned to the government's shift to a performance-based funding model. It is important to provide an outcomes-based assessment to examine the impact of these changes and to use the data generated to develop system-level insights for the government and institutions that can inform future accountability agreements. This project will also consider alternate forms of accountability controls. HEQCO is reviewing the publicly available SMA data and is considering research and assessment opportunities. Depending on the final research questions, it may be necessary to request data from MCU.

Freedom of Speech on Campus *fall 2024*

The objective of the Ontario Campus Free Speech Policy is to ensure that all colleges and universities have a strong and clear policy that is consistent across the sector. Regulations under the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act, 2005 were amended, requiring HEQCO to monitor and evaluate ongoing implementation of free speech policies by postsecondary institutions and provide reports and recommendations to the minister. Institutions are required to submit to HEQCO annual reports detailing the implementation of their free speech policies. HEQCO reviews and assesses each institution's annual report and produces a report summarizing the findings.

Enrolment Projections and Population Demographics *winter 2025*

As directed by the Minister in HEQCO's Annual Letter of Direction, this project examines enrolment projections, with a particular focus on domestic students. Using relevant data from MCU as well as the Ministry of Finance, HEQCO will examine demographic trends and their potential impact to the postsecondary system in Ontario.

Part-Time College Enrolment *winter 2025*

In collaboration with MCU, this project will provide a more complete understanding of part-time students at Ontario colleges. As specified in HEQCO's Annual Letter of Direction, this project will examine the current profile of part-time college learners, including course loads, time to credential and enrolment strategies. The project will also include a review of the current college part-time funding model.

Internationalization Consortium *ongoing*

HEQCO is working with partners to explore research projects focused on the quality, accountability and sustainability of international education in Ontario. Projects focus on:

- Labour market outcomes for international students post-graduation

- Immigration pathways/programs
- Institutional sustainability
- Community partnerships to enhance student success
- Regulatory environment for international recruitment agents

Upcoming Projects

Transferable Skills and Labour Market Success for Ontario Graduates

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. Following projects pursued through the Skills Consortium, HEQCO will consider opportunities to explore skills developed in WIL and experiential learning experiences.

Accessibility, Inclusion and Reconciliation/Decolonization in Ontario PSE

HEQCO is considering projects that would extend our understanding of access and equity. Future projects may have a specific (standalone) focus on equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI), or for projects focused on other key questions, an equity lens may be applied where data is available. HEQCO is considering projects to explore:

- Equitable graduate outcomes
- Goals, objectives and outcomes of EDI and Indigenization on organizational structure at Ontario colleges and universities.

Pathways for Francophone Students in Ontario

Ontario's postsecondary education (PSE) system consists of several publicly assisted institutions that offer French-language programming, including French-only colleges, French-only universities, and bilingual or multilingual institutions or campuses. Limited data and research, however, are available to understand the PSE pathways Francophone students pursue in Ontario. HEQCO is exploring opportunities to study Francophone student PSE pathways and the factors that shape student decision-making. MCU data may strengthen this project. HEQCO will consider submitting a data request to MCU in spring 2024.

Exploring Ontario's PSE landscape

Ontario's PSE landscape includes publicly assisted colleges and universities as well as Indigenous Institutes, private career colleges and private universities. HEQCO is considering opportunities to examine the relationships between PSE providers as well as the roles each play in Ontario's system. HEQCO will consider a data request to MCU in spring 2024 to strengthen work on this topic.

A Cost/Benefit Analysis of PSE Non-completion

HEQCO is exploring a continuation of our work related to non-completion in Ontario to include development of a cost-benefit analysis framework. The framework could be used to understand how the net costs of non-completion to students, institutions, governments and society compare to those attributable to credential completion. The framework could also allow an exploration of “savings” that might be generated from interventions that help support students to program completion.

Quick Stats

Quick Stats is HEQCO’s compendium of data on Ontario’s postsecondary system. Data on applicants, enrolment, student experience, graduates, graduation outcomes and tuition are available on the HEQCO website. This section was updated in 2023 and a data request for the next update is expected to MCU in spring 2024.

Agency Performance Metrics

HEQCO's performance metrics capture the impact and scope of the research agenda and the responsible, efficient use of public funds. The use of reporting metrics on research performance is a fraught process and these annual metrics are intended to be transparent, output-driven, relevant and straightforward. With the return of HEQCO's conference biennially, future Business Plans will look to incorporate a stakeholder satisfaction metric related to the event.

Research

Research is at the core of HEQCO's work. Metrics for reporting research impact are challenging to develop and strict quantitative measures may not capture the scope and reach of HEQCO's work.

Research output: Number of HEQCO-authored/published publications, including research reports, government evaluations and assessment projects (including the freedom of speech annual review) and briefing notes. *Note: this metric previously included blogs and commentary products, which are now captured in the communications section under distribution and outreach.*

Target: 12

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: 12 annually based on current staffing FTE

Administration

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

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

Target: <10%

Maximizing funding deployment while managing within budget: Deliver HEQCO's mandate within the annual operating budget while maximizing mobilization of funding for research purposes. (Note: as a provincial agency HEQCO is prohibited from operating with costs beyond allocated funding revenues)

Target: >90% of budgeted funds deployed

Communications

Addressing the challenges facing higher education requires more than government policy. HEQCO's commitment to sharing its work publicly helps inform the Ministry of Colleges and Universities as well as institutional leaders, faculty, students, employers and the general public, and allows for informed discussions that help address 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 communication activities.

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

Target: 5% growth from previous year

Readership: The number of visitors to research product pages, including reports, commentary and resources, on HEQCO's website.

Target: Maintain, within 5%, the three-year average of top 20 products

Distribution and outreach: The number of direct email outreaches to stakeholders/target audiences through accessible, bilingual products with a focus on digital formats on the HEQCO website. These include research products, blogs and commentary, marketing materials and communications products.

Target: 20 products based on current FTE and research framework

Financial Requirements

Approximately 85% of HEQCO's \$4.1M operating budget is allocated to research — both internal and external — which is the core business of the agency. The remaining funds support council governance, executive services and administration of the agency. HEQCO remains focused on staff development and continuing to build capacity in both the project pipeline and in research productivity. Some other key drivers for the financial forecast include:

- The HEQCO conference was successfully held in person on November 3, 2023 in Toronto. The three-year financial forecast includes projections for revenue and costs associated with a future conference targeted for the fall of 2025.
- Following HEQCO's decommissioning of its office space on August 30, 2020, HEQCO continues to demonstrate the strategic advantage of the remote agency operating model. HEQCO received confirmation in 2023 that the agency is exempt from the Community Jobs Initiative.
- HEQCO was identified as part of phase one of the Centralization of Broader Real Estate Authority of government agencies. As a result, future decisions relating to a physical location for the agency would become part of the responsibilities of the Ministry of Infrastructure in consultation with HEQCO. The three-year financial forecast does not include capital costs relating to a lease agreement since HEQCO's preferred operating model is to continue as a virtual agency at this time.

HEQCO's research budget continues to support program evaluation work on behalf of the Ministry of Colleges and Universities as required in the annual Letter of Direction. HEQCO remained stable with its FTE count in the 2023/24 cycle while managing parental leaves for HEQCO employees with temporary staff or term contracts. HEQCO requests that its current base budget be preserved for the 2024/25 cycle to continue delivery on the mandate of the agency. If HEQCO is required to transition away from the current virtual agency operating model, additional resources would be required to fund commissioning and operating costs associated with an office location.

Risk Management

HEQCO staff continue to work with the Audit Committee to ensure financial controls and oversight are effective and adequate, including updates to employ best practices wherever possible. Following a market check of our annual audit services, HEQCO successfully transitioned to an engagement with a new audit firm for the 2022/23 fiscal year. HEQCO continues to receive clean audit opinions from the new auditors in their annual report, which includes a review of HEQCO's internal processes and financial controls.

HEQCO introduced the use of a Risk Heat Map in 2020 to monitor the key risk factors for HEQCO's operations on a quarterly basis. The Risk Heat Map is presented to the Audit Committee and the Board each quarter with updated mitigation strategies and actions taken to ensure appropriate risk management.

In 2023, the HEQCO Board transitioned significantly with the expiration of appointment terms for two members, and two resignations from the Board following appointments to conflicting provincial roles. The HEQCO Board did welcome the appointment of one new member who received their Order in Council for their first term on the Board, but the Board is now comprised of only three voting members. To assist the Minister in the future recruitment of members with the knowledge and experience needed to support the Board's oversight role, HEQCO developed a Board Member Skills Matrix. This Skills Matrix identifies the current strengths of existing members and the key areas of expertise needed to support agency governance and accountability. The Board Member Skills Matrix was provided to the Minister's office in September 2023 to assist in the selection of the most appropriate candidates to replenish the membership of the Board.

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, inclusion and decolonization (EDID); talent management (including performance assessments); mentoring; professional development opportunities; media-interview and accessible writing skills; as well as opportunities for project management and leadership skills development. HEQCO provided facilitated training and development to all HEQCO staff in 2023 on challenging unconscious bias in the workplace and within the context of HEQCO's research projects.

HEQCO has 21 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff encompassing research, administration and governance functions. In addition, HEQCO continues to provide six work-integrated learning opportunities, totalling an additional 2.5 FTE, for Ontario postsecondary students and recent graduates through HEQCO's internship program.

HEQCO's staff continue to work remotely and have developed processes and embraced new technology to ensure HEQCO is able to operate flexibly and efficiently in this virtual environment. While initially considered a short-term measure due to the pandemic, HEQCO continues to monitor and evaluate our future needs for a physical location and currently prefers to remain a virtual agency long term.

Appendix 1: An estimate of financial resources needed for 2024–2027.

Appendix 2: Risk Assessment Reporting Tool for 2023/24 required by the Agencies and Appointments Directive and approved by HEQCO’s Board of Directors.

Appendix 3: HEQCO Research Framework: 2024–2027

Appendix 1: Financial Requirements

		2024/2025	2025/2026	2026/2027	Notes
	Account Descriptions	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	#
REVENUE	Transfer Payments	4,100.0	4,100.0	4,100.0	1
	Less Capital Purchases	17.0	17.0	17.0	
	Conference Registration Revenue	-	60.0	-	2
	Deferred revenue	20.0	20.0	20.0	
	Interest	24.0	22.0	20.0	12
	Total Revenue	4,127.0	4,185.0	4,123.0	
		-	-	-	
EXPENSES	Council Governance & Executive Services	9.5%	9.7%	9.8%	
	Board per diem	5.8	6.6	6.6	
	Salaries & benefits	327.5	332.8	338.2	6
	Travel & Communications	5.0	5.0	5.0	
	Services, supplies and equipment	22.0	22.2	22.4	4,5,8
	Depreciation expenses	1.7	1.7	1.7	
	sub total	362.0	368.3	374.0	
		-	-	-	
	Research	84.8%	84.3%	84.2%	
	Research contracts, seminars & workshop, data purchases, translation, communications	896.0	871.8	726.0	2
	salaries & benefits	2,393.8	2,461.1	2,530.4	6
	Travel & communications	13.0	13.5	14.0	
	Services, supplies and equipment	247.6	250.0	252.5	4,5,8
	Depreciation Expenses	17.0	17.0	17.0	
	sub total	3,567.4	3,613.4	3,540.0	
		-	-	-	
	Administration	5.7%	6.0%	6.0%	
	salaries and benefits	181.5	186.9	192.5	6
	Travel & communications	0.2	0.3	0.3	
	Services, Supplies and equipment	14.7	14.8	15.0	4,5,8
	Depreciation Expenses	1.3	1.3	1.3	
sub total	197.6	203.3	209.1		
	-	-	-		
	Total Resource Requirements	4,127.0	4,185.0	4,123.0	

- Notes:
- 1 The budget plan for 2024-2027 and beyond is based on an annual allocation of \$4.1 million.
 - 2 HEQCO plans to host one conference in 2025/2026 and expects to receive revenue through ticket sales.
 - 3 Project expenditures are reported on the accrual basis of accounting.
 - 4 Common expenses (IT support, services, office supplies) are allocated to each department by FTE.
 - 5 Cost of services, supplies and equipment assumed to increase by 2% in 2024/2025 and 1% in following years.
 - 6 Salaries and benefits assumed to increase by 3% each year for the next three years.
 - 7 HEQCO has been a virtual operation, working from home since Sept. 1, 2020 as is expected to remain virtual for the next three years.
 - 8 Audit expenses are assumed to increase by 5% in 2023/2024, 3% in 2024/2025, 3% in 2026/2027 as per the terms of BDO Canada LLP.
 - 9 HEQCO's current FTE headcount is 23.5.
 - 10 Forecasts for 2024-2027 fiscal years include estimates and assumptions.
 - 11 Annual budgets are reviewed and approved by the board each year.
 - 12 Interest revenue is variable based on interest rates of the bank account.

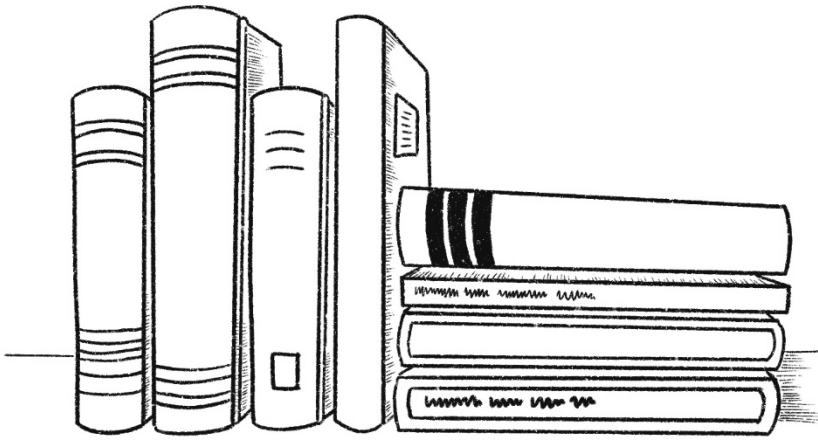
Appendix 2 - HEQCO Agency Risk Report

AGENCY NAME	RISK CATEGORY	RISK TITLE	RISK DEFINITION	ROOT CAUSE(S)	EXISTING CONTROLS	EXISTING CONTROL EFFECTIVENESS	RESIDUAL LIKELIHOOD	RESIDUAL IMPACT	RESIDUAL RISK SCORE & STATUS	RISK TREATMENT APPROACH	ACTION PLAN	DUE DATE	STATUS	COMMENTS
Indicate the agency's name.	Select the applicable risk category from the dropdown list.	Briefly summarize the risk in a few words. The risk title should reflect what the risk is.	Describe the risk, i.e. the effect of uncertainty on objectives. It can be characterized either as a potential negative (threat) or positive (opportunity) consequence or event that deviates from an expected outcome. The definition should be limited to 1 to 2 sentences, and should: a) Start with: "The risk of" or "The risk that" b) Then indicate: the impact/consequence of the risk c) Then describe: the risk d) End with: the event that caused the risk Here is a sample Risk Definition (the letters in brackets are for clarity only, do not include them in your definition): (a) The risk that (b) the agency is unable to sustain critical services (c) due to funding shortfall (d) stemming from aggressive revenue projections.	Optional Describe the root cause(s) of the risk. The root cause is the core issue that sets in motion the cause-and-effect reaction that ultimately leads to the risk.	Insert tangible/auditable policies, process or practices that are in place today that mitigate the risk and are therefore factored in the residual risk assessment calculation (Columns H and I).	Indicate the level of effectiveness of Existing Controls (Column F). Selections include: Fully Effective Partially Effective Ineffective This should be based on recent working knowledge of the controls. Reference the OPS Risk Assessment Methodology.	Indicate the likelihood of the risk occurring when Existing Controls in Column F are considered. Selections include: Insignificant (1) Minor (2) Moderate (3) Major (4) Critical (5) No Longer A Risk Not Assessed Reference the OPS Risk Assessment Methodology.	Indicate the impact of the risk when Existing Controls in Column F are considered. Selections include: Insignificant (1) Minor (2) Moderate (3) Major (4) Critical (5) No Longer A Risk Not Assessed Reference the OPS Risk Assessment Methodology.	The residual risk score and status will be automatically calculated with the formula of Residual Likelihood (Column H) x Residual Impact (Column I) Low (1-4) Medium (5-10) Medium-High (11-19) High (20+)	Determine the most appropriate Risk Treatment Approach. Selections include: Accept Mitigate Transfer Avoid Accept : to accept the risk as is, with no additional actions required. Mitigate : to take actions to reduce the risk. Transfer : to transfer the risk to a third-party, whether through insurance, or external means. Avoid : to stop the activity that is contributing to the risk.	No action is required where the Risk Treatment option "Accept", is selected. At a high level, insert each action, if possible in chronological order, that will be taken to either avoid, mitigate or transfer the risk (or to maximize the opportunity). When there is more than one action for a given risk, please identify each action separately, with its own due date and status. Actions detailed here should be SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) and, at a high level, detail how they will reduce the likelihood and impact of the risk, and identify each action owner.	Specify the date when each action will be completed. Additional context should be added in the Comments (Column G).	Specify the status for each action. Options include: On Track : Action is on track to be completed by due date. Delayed : Action is not on track to be completed by due date. Completed : Action has been completed. N/A - Re-positioned as Ongoing Control : It has been determined that Action fits better as an ongoing control and has been added to Existing Controls (Column F). No Longer Required : Action will no longer be completed or will not be tracked as a mitigating action for the risk.	Provide any additional context with respect to the risk and/or action plan, including any progress to date specific to each action identified. For action plans: • If Action is now "Completed", specify here when requirements have been met. • If Action is now "Delayed", specify here the revised plan to deliver as soon as possible. • If Action now has a revised due date, include that here.
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Fulfillment of mission and mandate	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 fulfil its original research and its assessment and evaluation mandates at risk.		HEQCO Business Plan and Annual Research Plan realistically reflect the resources required for the Agency to continue to meet its overall mandate.	Partially Effective	Possible (3)	Moderate (3)	Medium (5-10)	Accept				Adequate financial resources are required to continue to attract highly respected leadership and skilled and talented researchers to carry out the agency's overall mandate. As a virtual agency, HEQCO does not require a permanent office location but will work with the Ministry (including Ministry of Infrastructure) to ensure resources are available for the occasional use of 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.
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Misalignment of Objectives	The agency's objectives, as reflected in its business/research plan do not align with Ministry objectives stated in the letter of direction.		HEQCO's strategic direction is informed by the Minister's letter of direction. 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 three year rolling business/research plan approved by the Minister.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: The Agency will continue to work with the Ministry to ensure timely delivery of the letter of direction to incorporate objectives into the Agency business plan.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Reputation	Meeting Public or Stakeholder Expectations	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. Stakeholders dismiss the relevance and work of HEQCO. Government policy initiatives affect HEQCO plans and stakeholder expectations.		As an agency, HEQCO is well-positioned to get 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. HEQCO activities to engage and consult stakeholders, such as the annual conference, successfully resumed in 2023. With the increase in virtual events and meetings since the onset of the pandemic, HEQCO has continuously connected with stakeholders and partners in virtual discussions to make sure the research is timely and relevant to the needs of the sector.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Ongoing dialogue with the government and the sector to ensure engagement is maintained.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Internal Policies, Procedures and Processes	Policies or directives are not adhered to within the organization. Outside research partners find it difficult to adhere to government policies and directives (ie. Open Data).		HEQCO's policies and procedures are subject to internal and external audits. 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.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Provide information and training for staff and board members at regular meetings on any policy or directive updates.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Agency Compliance with OPS Directives, Policies and Guidelines	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. Disbursements of government directives are not met. Fraud or abuse in expense claims.		The MOU lists applicable policies and directives. The ministry regularly informs the agency of new/revised directives and policies. HEQCO consults the Agency Governance website for information. 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 DON framework was reviewed by Internal Audit Division. Ministry staff ensures HEQCO is aware of changes to OPS Directives.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Regularized policy reviews ensure the latest information can be incorporated into processes to ensure compliance.	Ongoing	On Track	

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Annual Business Plan	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. Delayed ministerial approval of business plans may ultimately prevent long term planning.		There is ongoing dialogue between the board and the Deputy. HEQCO/MCU meet regularly re: research priorities. HEQCO schedules its process to meet submission and posting deadlines. BP processes strive to meet requirements of the AAD.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: In the absence of approval, HEQCO works on the assumption that long term BP initiatives are aligned based on ongoing dialogue with the ministry.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Internal governance and development of board	The roles of the chair, CEO, board directors are not clearly understood leading to the board making improper decisions.		Board members receive an orientation and 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 Code of Conduct attestation annually and to declare any conflicts in board meetings.	Partially Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Arrange additional training for board members and staff as needed.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Risk and Issue Management	Risks are not mitigated and issues are not managed.		Risks are formally assessed annually and monitored quarterly by the board through the quarterly risk heat map. Issues are identified and addressed at weekly senior management meetings. Contentious issues are managed within the context of a Ministry/Agency Communications Protocol.	Fully Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Accept				
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Performance Measurement	Agency performance is below stated KPIs or measures are not relevant.		Performance goals are set out in the agency's letter of direction, stated and reported in the Business and Research Plan. KPIs are reported on in the Annual Report. CEO and staff performance is reviewed annually against objectives. The CRM system provides management information and status reports on projects. Management monitors project status reports.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Objectives are incorporated into the staff performance review process to support meeting Agency KPIs.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Reliability of Financial Systems and Financial Management Processes	Financial information is not up to date, accurate, or reliable. Internal financial planning processes and controls are not in place. Payments are not made in a timely fashion.		The Sage 50 accounting system provides financial reports. Ceridian provides payroll services. Financial staff cross-check each other's work for all transactions. A second level of checking is provided by the Director, Finance and Administration. Segregation of duties and requirements of the Delegation of Authority (DOA) involve multiple persons in the process for reconciliation, journal entry, payroll, payments. Bank statements are reconciled monthly. Accrued liabilities are updated and recorded monthly. Senior management meets regularly to review financial commitments. All financial transactions are readily available for audit. HEQCO's financials are audited by an external independent auditor. Auditors are routinely subject to a market check and change of audit firm. Quarterly financial reports are provided to the board and minister. Reports are immediately available on request.	Partially Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Professional development training provided to admin staff to further enhance skills.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Budget Planning Process	The agency does not meet budget planning requirements or timelines. With no current base funding, the timing of first quarterly instalment of the transfer payment from the ministry can jeopardize the agency's ability to meet first quarter financial commitments.		HEQCO complies with MOU corporate reporting requirements. If available, a budget surplus from the previous year is used to temporarily ease first quarter financial pressures. HEQCO plans activities within its budget allocation and submits required reports on time. HEQCO staff forecast cash flow to ensure sufficient cash on hand to meet first quarter commitments.	Partially Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: The agency will continue to work with the Ministry to ensure timely delivery of the annual Funding Confirmation Letter to sign funding allocation with the budget. Action 2: The ministry and the agency have worked to establish a first quarter installment payment to ensure the agency is able to meet its operational commitments in the first quarter.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Delegation of Authority Controls	Transactions are not properly authorized.		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.	Fully Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Accept				
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/IT	Security of IT Records (Memory sticks, Shared drives, etc.) and Creating, Managing and Complying with Record Retention Schedules	IT records are not secure. The agency does not comply with records retention schedules. Paper records are not secure.		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 file server redundancy. Staff is aware of IT policies and processes re: safe storage of data. Multifactor authentication of users now implemented across HEQCO. Documents are retained and backed-up electronically. All new HEQCO records are digital and retention policies are followed. All staff are trained on record management functions related to their positions. Paper records are historical and are stored by Iron Mountain which can be readily retrieved as necessary. 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.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Enhance IT security where possible including any available updates to Multifactor authentication and ESET protections.	Ongoing	On Track	

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/Human Resources	Succession Planning to Manage Vacancies	Unexpected vacancies lead to interrupted service.		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 competitors. Some gapping in the replenishment of staff is inevitable, but can be managed through the reassignment of critical project tasks to other team members in the interim.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Accept				
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/Policy	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.		Copies of the conflict of interest and ethics policies 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 and accessible on the internal SharePoint system.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Refresher training to be provided regularly.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/IT	Strategic or Operational Plan for Managing IT Resources	IT resources do not support business needs. IT supports do not adequately serve the remote workplace. Staff home IT services may be insufficient to meet the needs of remote work.		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 to accessible WCAG AA standards. IT service level agreements are 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.	Partially Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Capital planning to ensure system upgrades can meet the needs of remote work.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Board Governance, Accountability and Oversight	Slow appointments process creates operational difficulties for the 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 and provides a matrix of the skills of the existing board members.	Partially Effective	Possible (3)	Minor (2)	Medium (5-10)	Accept				
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/Human Resources	Skill Shortage and Salary Compensation	Skilled employees are not available to meet agency needs. Staff/talent retention becomes an issue because of the challenges related to a remote workplace. Wage freezes affect the agency's ability to attract and retain staff.		Staff hiring competitions receive an excellent response. Employees have access to a budget allocation for training which must be work-related. Staff are provided with all the IT and other supports necessary to work from home. HEQCO has successfully transitioned to remote work as a virtual agency and currently has no requirements for permanent office space. HEQCO's traditional catchment area for recruiting has been the large pool of young PhD grads and post doctoral fellows in the Toronto area but this pool has been broadened with the current remote work format. Position classifications and salaries are regularly reviewed and compared with ministry and similar agency equivalents as appropriate.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Ongoing engagement with staff to understand any issues relating to remote work and staff satisfaction.	Ongoing	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/Program Delivery	Service Demand	The year-to-year financial business model is not helpful as HEQCO's work involves multi-year projects. Budget cuts threaten operations and agency if it doesn't have sufficient financial resources to accommodate increased in-year demand for its services from the ministry.		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. When demands for additional projects at the request of the ministry strain budget capacity, these projects need to be supported by additional funds from the ministry through transfer payment agreements. Interim and final reports are provided.	Partially Effective	Possible (3)	Insignificant (1)	Low (1-4)	Accept				
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/Program Delivery	Service Effectiveness	Non-completion of projects by research partners, or quality issues affecting external or internal research projects. HEQCO work does not meet high standards. Inability of HEQCO to fulfil 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. HEQCO research projects are at risk because data sources such as StatsCan are unavailable, and partners such as school boards do not have staff available to participate.		Contracts include interim deliverables, firm deadlines and can be cancelled or not renewed. 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 in multi-national projects. HEQCO appreciates collegial efforts by MCLU to facilitate limited access to aggregate OEN data compiled within MCLU. We continue to participate with MCLU 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 allow the best possible research for MCLU. 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. HEQCO has transitioned to the virtual RDC model with StatsCan.	Partially Effective	Possible (3)	Moderate (3)	Medium (5-10)	Mitigate	Action 1: The Agency will continue to work with the Ministry to provide access to data to enable the research projects to be completed.	Ongoing	On Track	

Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/IT	IT Strategy, Privacy and Reliability	IT resources are impacted by external IT protocols, Google, Microsoft etc., which limit HEQCO's ability to connect and interact with the sector. Changes to the role of social media impacts the dissemination of HEQCO's research products.		IT infrastructure has been diversified to reduce the reliance on a single domain for delivering HEQCO email and correspondence. An additional email security review has been completed to ensure HEQCO is protected as much as possible from SPAM labelling of emails and communications. All mass dissemination of HEQCO research is delivered through a separate domain to provide additional protection to the HEQCO.ca domain.	Partially Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Continued monitoring of email data records for each of our HEQCO domains in partnership with the IT service provider.	Ongoing	On Track
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/IT	IT Strategy, Privacy and Reliability	IT resources do not support business needs. IT supports do not adequately serve the remote workplace. Staff home IT services may be insufficient to meet the needs of remote work. Personal information is inadvertently disclosed.		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 to accessible AA standards. IT service level agreements are 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. All data for research is scrubbed of personal identifiers. Personal information of staff/board members is kept in HR files in a secure directory accessible only to the Director, Finance and Administration and two staff persons. Hiring and RFP protocols prescribe that personal information be safeguarded throughout even the recruitment process.	Partially Effective	Rare (1)	Moderate (3)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Continued training for staff on IT privacy and security to ensure reliability of the HEQCO infrastructure.	Ongoing	On Track
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/IT	IT Hardware, Procurement and Capital Projects	Loss of critical information due to disaster. Capital projects are over budget due to cost escalation and delays.		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. HEQCO IT procurement practices follow government directives. RFP and contract templates reflect government requirements. Access to information is restricted and only available to relevant staff. The IT procurement process must be approved by the CEO and is controlled by the Director, Finance and Administration. Capital projects are relatively small and limited to IT equipment renewal. The RFP process is used to award contracts and contracts are strictly monitored. Cost over-runs must be signed-off by the CEO and Director, Finance and Administration. Projects over \$100,000 must be reported to the Board.	Partially Effective	Unlikely (2)	Minor (2)	Low (1-4)	Mitigate	Action 1: Review of protocols and system reliability for data and system backups.	Ongoing	On Track



HEQCO Research Framework

2024–2027

Introduction

HEQCO's 2024–2027 Research Framework provides an overview of the context and issues that shape Ontario's postsecondary education (PSE) landscape and our work. The Framework signals our commitment to short-term, emerging concerns and long-term priorities. It reflects our values: to deliver independent, accessible and high-quality research that is responsive to government and sector priorities. It captures our aspiration to influence key decisions related to Ontario's PSE system.

The Framework builds on the momentum generated over the past three years to explore strengths and challenges in higher education. Partnerships with Ontario organizations have supported our efforts: we gained access to data in collaboration with the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU), OCAS, the Hamilton Community Foundation, Colleges Ontario, The Council of Ontario Universities, Ontario school boards and PSE institutions. We leveraged these partnerships to establish communities of practice and develop the program for our upcoming conference. To improve the transparency of our work, we marked our successes by establishing and meeting organizational key performance indicators (KPIs) and included these KPIs in our business plan and annual report.

In addition to executing projects outlined in our annual letters of direction from MCU, we provided advice to the Minister's office on urgent policy questions. We look forward to collaborating with MCU on future letter-of-direction projects. Through a strong partnership, we can explore PSE issues that are forward-looking, timely and relevant to government and PSE stakeholders.

We renew our commitment to the priorities that have long guided HEQCO's work and evolve our definitions of them. Since 2005, HEQCO has supported an Ontario postsecondary system that ensures a high-quality student experience; is more sustainable; and offers equitable access for all students. This new Framework updates HEQCO's priorities in the following ways:

- **We signal the importance of a broader understanding of access by shifting our language to encompass student opportunities and successes.** Access typically refers to the beginning of a student's PSE journey; research, policy and sector priority must also focus on persistence, graduation and pathways to the labour market. We are considering options for terminology to best reflect our commitment to exploring incorporating these issues.
- **We add a new data priority.** Our work highlights the importance of data access and quality. Ontario's PSE system is the largest in Canada, but it lags behind other jurisdictions in data quality and availability. Conducting high-quality research to explore student success, quality and sustainability requires up-to-date, easily

accessible data. Ontario's fragmented PSE data landscape and lack of willingness to share what should be publicly accessible limits the work and insights that research can provide to the sector.

Ontario's PSE Context

Ontario's PSE is at an inflection point. The environment is replete with opportunities and risks that are technology-related, policy-driven and circumstantial. Artificial intelligence is reshaping all aspects of institutional activities, including student recruitment, teaching and learning, assessment and research. While colleges and universities have largely emerged from the pandemic's disruptions, some pandemic adaptations have accelerated improvements in the tools, platforms, technologies and systems that shape teaching and learning. Other challenges — K-12 learning loss associated with school closures; reductions in co-curricular programming, support services and work-integrated learning opportunities — will unfold over time as students enrolled at all levels during the pandemic make their way into and through PSE.

The landscape of PSE institutions is also shifting. New PSE institutions, both public and private, have opened in Ontario, and branch campuses for Public College-Private Partnership (PCPP) programs have crowded into the GTA. Funding for Ontario PSE is also changing: performance-based funding as planned in the 2020–2025 SMAs is set to be implemented for the first time in 2023-24.

Federal and provincial policy decisions are shaping international student enrolment across Canada. For the federal government, PSE serves as a tool for immigration and a way to address shortages of highly skilled workers. Institutions operate as entry points for newcomers, and Post-Graduate Work Permits (PGWP) help international students gain work experience needed for permanent residency. In Ontario, international student tuition is the only tool for increasing institutional revenue in an environment marked by financial constraint and increasing costs. International student enrolment growth in Ontario has outpaced growth in all other provinces. Between 2012-13 and 2020-21, international student enrolment increased by 342% at Ontario colleges and 58% at universities. The Ontario government has explicitly supported increased international enrolment to ensure that institutions are able to balance budgets and deliver their mandates.

Ontario's PSE sector is in a precarious financial position. Provincial expenditures per FTE student in Ontario remain the lowest in Canada. MCU collects financial metrics on each institution and knows which institutions are at risk; many are operating with large deficits due to frozen tuition and operating grants. Institutions' costs continue to increase for faculty and staff salaries, technology infrastructure, utilities and student supports. For

some institutions, financial challenges are exacerbated by geography: recruiting and retaining students to study in northern communities is an ongoing challenge.

The constrained financial environment is an immediate concern, but it also shapes Ontario's long-term future. Demographic shifts over the next 10 years are expected to lead to increases in domestic PSE enrolments. If institutions must rely on international tuition, they may not have the capacity to serve all Ontarians seeking PSE. These challenges will impact Ontario's economy and citizenry.

The risks and challenges associated with the current environment are largely focused on the availability of adequate resources to support programming. The quality of student learning experiences, co-curricular activities, support services and institutions' research agendas are all at risk. In this environment, research into the state of Ontario's PSE system is more important than ever.

Research Themes: 2024–2027

Through our ongoing work, and in light of the opportunities and risks mentioned above, we have identified five themes to guide the development of new projects and initiatives.

Internationalization

Internationalization in PSE is a broad concept that includes research partnerships, faculty recruitment, curriculum, programming and student mobility. Campus internationalization activities have long been considered an important means of introducing learners to global perspectives and diverse ideas. Such factors influence institutional reputations and rankings. Recent policy decisions by both the federal and provincial governments to fill gaps in the labour market and generate institutional revenue resulted in a dramatic and ongoing increase in the recruitment of international students to Canada and Ontario.

New research is needed to explore the intersections of PSE, immigration pathways and labour market gaps. HEQCO projects will focus on international student experiences and successes, including their pathways to immigration and the labour market. Projects will also explore how Ontario's policy context impacts institutional sustainability and system stability.

System Composition

Through the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, government has granted permission for 17 private and public out-of-province institutions to operate in Ontario; 12 of these institutions received consent to operate in Ontario between 2017 and 2023. Government has also established three new publicly assisted institutions in the past few years. Two of these new institutions are located in northern Ontario communities and two of the three offer Francophone programming. In 2017, Ontario recognized and

authorized nine Indigenous Institutes to independently offer postsecondary credentials. The number of private career colleges is in constant flux; currently, there are nearly 750 PCCs operating in Ontario. Though private institutions do not receive government funding directly, some benefit indirectly through OSAP eligibility. Partnerships between publicly assisted colleges and private providers (PCPPs) have added another layer of complexity; these partnerships generally serve to establish colleges outside the GTA with branch campuses in GTA communities.

Changes in Ontario's PSE landscape may increase access and success for students, but there is limited public data available to explore outcomes for students enrolled in private institutions, PCCs and PCPPs. In partnership with Indigenous Institutes and leaders, research is needed to advance governments' goals for ensuring opportunities for First Nations, Indigenous and Métis students. New research is also needed to outline a more strategic architecture for Ontario's PSE landscape and to understand how Ontario's PSE composition can sustainably support high-quality learning experiences and student success.

Student Experience

Student experiences and outcomes are shaped by individual background characteristics, including identities and positionality. Research indicates that family income, disability, first-generation status and immigration background all impact student outcomes; K-12 performance and enrolment status (full- or part-time) also influence outcomes. Institutional programming interacts with students' background characteristics to shape experiences. Changes in course delivery mode, expanded work-integrated learning opportunities and new program types, such as microcredentials and three-year college bachelor's degrees, offer new opportunities that can enhance student success.

Institutional programming is influenced by financial constraints. Technological infrastructure, tools and staff training to support innovation and excellence require ongoing investment. In Ontario's context of government disinvestment, students' access to high-quality programming and support is at risk. Research is needed to explore the funding and policy decisions that shape student experiences from matriculation to transitions into the labour market. Research on student experience should also focus on intersectional background characteristics, such as race, disability, LGBTQ2S+ identity, Indigenous identity, gender and family income, to inform our understandings of equitable access and success.

Accountability and Performance

Government established a system for accountability, transparency and performance in the Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs). The most recent SMAs (2020–2025) introduced

performance-based funding, administered through institutional reporting on 10 metrics focused on student and economic outcomes. The SMA metrics serve as one definition of PSE system quality and serve as an important tool for government to drive sector activity on high-priority initiatives.

College and university accountability and performance can be conceptualized in other ways. For example, 'accountability' may focus on how institutions are delivering on their specific mandates or progressing toward equitable student outcomes. 'Performance' may focus on entrepreneurial activity, engagement with employers, student transfer pathways or supports for international students. Accountability and performance are lenses that can be brought to each of our research themes. These are also lenses that can be used to examine government policy and funding decisions.

Our work will explore accountability and performance both broadly and with specific focus on the current SMAs. Research will help illuminate the impact of SMAs on institutional behaviours and system quality. Projects will also explore the relationships between financial sustainability, accountability and government policy.

PSE's Alignment with the Labour Market

With the emergence of the knowledge-based economy, governments across Canada emphasized ties between PSE and the labour market through policy, funding and (de)regulation. PSE is now recognized as an economic generator; graduates' success is defined in terms of individual economic benefit and contributions to community prosperity. Students, government and institutions are focused on graduates' pathways to the labour market.

In Ontario, government's focus on the labour market can explicitly be seen in funding opportunities and SMA accountabilities. Government has supported the development of microcredential programs aimed at helping graduates upgrade their skills or gain skills needed for employment. College-degree granting authority was expanded to address gaps in the province's labour needs. In the current SMAs, institutions report graduate earnings, employment in a related field and (institution-specific) economic impact.

Technology and AI are shaping jobs of the future faster than governments and institutions can respond. Employment outcomes indicate that Ontario PSE graduates develop technical and transferable skills across a range of credentials and programs that serve as building blocks for their futures. For many graduates, work-integrated learning opportunities serve as strong bridges between the classroom and employment opportunities.

The touchpoints between PSE and the labour market need renewed examination and planning. Research is needed to explore how PSE programming aligns with trends and

opportunities in the labour market and how government policy supports necessary alignments. Robust data related to employment trends, demographics and immigration will be needed to explore these issues.

Next Steps

Exploring these themes with a new focus on data advocacy will bring us to deeper understandings of student success, quality and sustainability in Ontario's PSE sector.

HEQCO's position as an independent agency located between government and institutions allows us to explore issues that are important to the sector in an equitable, balanced manner. Our work requires both renewed and new collaborations, and we look forward to continuing our partnerships with MCU, K-12 school boards, the Council of Ontario Universities, Colleges Ontario, OCAS and OUAC. We anticipate opportunities to collaborate with other agencies and institutions through future consortia. HEQCO's conference serves as a means to bring stakeholders together to share best practices and insights.

We will develop projects that are distributed across our priority areas and focused on urgent, important and long-term issues. Through engagement with MCU, we will work to outline projects included in our annual Letter of Direction that focus on issues of mutual interest and strategic importance for the sector.

High-quality, accessible data is a perennial concern. Our work will leverage existing datasets: Statistics Canada, MCU and institutional, where available. But using existing and available data will not necessarily result in the research needed to support and enhance Ontario's PSE sector. The data landscape is too fractured and access is too constrained. We will continue our work with MCU to streamline a request process under our Data Sharing Agreement. We will also press MCU to provide ongoing access to enrolment files compiled by the Ministry for PSE institutions.

Our data advocacy will extend to the underlying architecture of Ontario's data landscape. Government currently has the tools it needs to create longitudinal datasets required to examine student pathways from K-12 settings, through PSE and into the labour market. These data are not being used effectively or efficiently. HEQCO will seek opportunities to develop pilot projects using linkages that combine existing datasets, such as K-12 administrative and PSE data. Producing high-quality research to inform and support Ontario's PSE will illustrate the power and promise of robust, accessible data.

Ontario's PSE environment is marked by opportunity and challenge. HEQCO's 2024–2027 Research Framework reflects and responds to this complexity. Through our research, HEQCO will support government's efforts to ensure high-quality student learning

experiences and outcomes, support institutional innovation and strengthen connections between employers and graduates.