

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

2025–2028 Business Plan



Mandate

“To assist the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security 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” (*Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario 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 based on 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 by relationships with postsecondary institutions, non-profit agencies and community organizations. Through these connections, we ensure that the leading research and practices from around the world are made available to Ontario decision makers as a catalyst for informed decisions, collaboration and innovation. HEQCO’s global perspective on higher education brings the best ideas, findings and insights to Ontario.

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 clear and concise communication. To help bridge the gap between complex research knowledge and its active use in the postsecondary sector, HEQCO’s work is written in an accessible style and made 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 continues to seek out solutions to the significant and persistent data gaps that exist at both the provincial and national levels.

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, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES).

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

We are in a time of profound importance for the postsecondary education (PSE) sector in Ontario. The interconnected issues of internationalization, labour market alignment and the sustainability of colleges and universities are prominent in media coverage and in policy discussions at both the provincial and federal levels. The response to these issues will impact institutions' fiscal positions, program and enrolment decisions, student supports, student experience and research capabilities into the future. HEQCO's business plan for 2025–2028 anticipates the opportunity to provide evidence-based research and policy advice that is relevant and responsive to the needs of both the government and the broader higher education sector. Our research focuses on current issues facing the sector, as well as questions and challenges that lie ahead.

Our many partnerships with sector institutions, not-for-profits and PSE-related organizations facilitate our ability to conduct and deliver research that is timely, relevant, insightful and trustworthy. For example, we are developing a consortium on generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) that will bring together partners and projects to explore the impact of GenAI on higher education as it relates to accessibility, institutional operations, legal implications, graduates' preparation for the labour market and teaching and learning.

Other components of our research agenda that will examine internationalization, PSE system design and performance, student experience and outcomes and the alignment between higher education and the labour market require access to high-quality data. Ontario's fragmented PSE data landscape remains a challenge and limits the work and insights that research can provide to the sector. We will continue to work with our colleagues in the Ministry and in the sector to advocate for increased access to important data sets.

The HEQCO bi-annual conference will be held in November 2025. Our team is identifying a lineup of speakers, panels and workshops that will provide tangible solutions and insights that can support a postsecondary system during a time of rapid change.

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 stylized flourish at the end.

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

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 2025-26 Letter of Direction, agencies are directed to focus on:

Innovation: Provincial agencies are expected to provide high-quality public services. This includes providing service in an innovative and accessible manner, prioritizing customer satisfaction and simplifying interactions.

Sustainability: Provincial agencies must operate so that their current form is sustainable over the long term while delivering a high standard of service to the public.

Accountability: Provincial agencies deliver public services and are accountable to the government through the responsible minister. In delivering on their mandate, provincial agencies balance operational flexibility with the minister's accountability for the provincial agency to Cabinet, the Legislative Assembly and the people of Ontario.

HEQCO has developed a series of key performance indicators (KPIs) that directly address these priorities with emphasis on delivering accessible online materials, operating in a financially responsible manner and delivering research that is relevant to the needs of the government as well as the broader sector.

Government Priorities and Projects for HEQCO

The Ontario government invested in several PSE elements in the 2024 budget, including an investment of nearly \$1.3 billion over three years to support institutional sustainability. Changes to the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant focused on supporting health and human resource needs for the future. The government also passed the *Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act, 2024*, which increases transparency for ancillary fees and other student costs, while supporting student mental health and campus inclusivity.

In addition, the Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security asked HEQCO to undertake the following research projects in its 2025-26 Letter of Direction:

Post-graduation Settlement Trends

Using the Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform (ELMLP) from Statistics Canada, this project will provide a snapshot of where recent Ontario PSE graduates (domestic and international) of STEM and non-STEM programs work and reside after graduation. The report will provide the proportion of recent Ontario graduates working in

Ontario or other provinces; it will also provide the proportion of graduates who leave Ontario to work outside of Canada.

Efficiency Metrics

HEQCO will work with the Ministry to conduct research on approaches that have been used to measure and/or deliver efficiencies in postsecondary cost structures (e.g., administrative functions, student services, IT systems, physical facilities, procurement, academic programming). The report will provide an overview of challenges associated with studying PSE costs and will outline analytic approaches used in PSE efficiency analyses. The project will also examine initiatives to track or improve PSE efficiencies in comparator jurisdictions, including Australia, the UK and select US states.

Part-time Demand

HEQCO will examine the demand for part-time program offerings at publicly assisted colleges and universities. This will build on the work done by HEQCO on funding for part-time college enrolment. Using Statistics Canada and MCURES data, the report will include an overview of PSE part-time enrolment by institution type, age and gender. The report will also include a summary of research related to why some students seek part-time enrolment opportunities.

Campus Free Speech Policy

HEQCO will continue in its role of reporting on the ongoing implementation of the province's campus free speech policy. HEQCO will collect annual free speech reports from colleges and universities and will synthesize the reported information in an annual report.

HEQCO's Research Plan

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.

Research Themes: 2024–2027

Five core themes 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 have radically changed the landscape of international students 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 and private career colleges. 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. Students arrive on campuses with a range of needs that is constantly evolving, and institutions must continually adapt to deliver needed supports.

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 behaviour and system quality. Projects will also explore the relationships between financial sustainability, accountability and government policy.

Labour Market Alignment

The Ontario government's focus on the labour market can 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

Internationalization Consortium *Winter–Summer 2025*

HEQCO established a research consortium to engage interested parties from across the sector on the topic of international education in Ontario. The accountability and sustainability of internationalization in Ontario PSE is being explored through projects focused on:

- labour market outcomes for international students post-graduation;
- immigration pathways/programs;
- institutional sustainability;
- community partnerships to enhance student success; and
- the regulatory environment of international recruitment agents.

The first reports stemming from this consortium will be published in early 2025 and more will be rolled out over the year ahead.

[Internationalization, Accountability and Performance, Student Experience, Labour Market Alignment, System Composition]

Pathways for Francophone Students in Ontario *Winter 2025*

While Ontario is home to a robust Francophone population, limited data and research are available to understand the PSE pathways Francophone students pursue in the province. HEQCO is conducting two projects focused on PSE pathways and the factors that shape decision making for Francophone students. [System Composition, Student Experience]

Consortium on Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) *Winter 2025–Winter 2027*

HEQCO is establishing a new research consortium that will use evidence-based research to inform policies and practices around GenAI in Ontario. Research partners in the consortium will pursue projects focused on the following questions:

- How can GenAI be used to promote access, quality and sustainability in postsecondary education in Ontario?
- How can postsecondary institutions use GenAI in effective and ethical ways to support learning and operations?

HEQCO is seeking to fund projects that explore the use and/or impact of GenAI on higher education as it relates to accessibility, institutional operations, legal implications, graduates' preparation for the labour market and teaching and learning. [Student Experience, Labour Market Alignment, Accountability and Performance]

Impacts of the College Funding Model on Part-time Enrolment *Winter 2025*

This project was requested as part of HEQCO's 2024-25 Letter of Direction. An internal report has been submitted to the Ministry and a public report will be developed. HEQCO will focus on the funding model for part-time enrolments and programming at Ontario's publicly assisted colleges. The public report will include a description of the funding model, part-time enrolment trends, demand for part-time programming and an overview of colleges' approaches to part-time enrolments. [Student Experience, System Composition, Accountability and Performance]

Part-time Demand *Spring 2025*

As specified in MCURES's 2025-26 Letter of Direction, this work will extend HEQCO's previous review of the college part-time funding model. HEQCO will explore the demand for part-time enrolments at publicly assisted colleges and universities. Using Statistics Canada and MCURES data, the report will include an overview of PSE part-time enrolment by institution type, age and gender. The report will also include a summary of research related to why some students seek part-time enrolment opportunities. [Student Experience, Labour Market Alignment, System Composition]

Efficiency Metrics *Spring 2025*

As outlined in MCURES's 2025-26 Letter of Direction, HEQCO will work with the Ministry to conduct a jurisdictional scan and review on approaches that have been used to measure and/or deliver efficiencies in postsecondary institutions' cost structures. The report will provide an overview of challenges associated with studying PSE costs and will outline analytic approaches used in PSE efficiency analyses. The project will also examine initiatives to track or improve PSE efficiencies in comparator jurisdictions, including Australia, the UK and select US states. [Accountability and Performance, System Composition]

Strategic Mandate Agreement Outcomes *Spring 2025*

SMAs have been in place between the Ontario government and the province's colleges and universities for close to ten years. The most recent agreements are aligned with the government's shift to a performance-based funding model. This project will examine the evolution of Ontario's SMAs and consider how the agreements have impacted Ontario's PSE system. HEQCO may request data from MCURES to pursue this project. [Accountability and Performance, System Composition]

Government Incentives *Spring 2025*

The Ontario government can incentivize enrolment in PSE programs to address strategic priorities related to the labour market in specific regions. HEQCO partnered with OCAS to add a series of questions to their annual Applicant Experience and Intention Survey. These questions are designed to gauge the awareness and influence of government incentives to encourage enrolment in those college programs the government has designated as responding to labour market demand. HEQCO may request data or information from MCURES to pursue this project. [Labour Market Alignment, Student Experience, System Composition]

Personal Support Worker Enrolment Trends *Summer 2025*

The provincial government estimates that Ontario will need more than 50,000 additional personal support workers (PSWs) by 2032 to meet the increasing demand of the province's aging population. This project will explore enrolment trends and graduate outcomes for PSW programs and investigate the driving factors behind each.

We will address the following research questions:

- What are the application, enrolment and graduation trends in PSW programs?
- What factors influence changes to enrolment in PSW programs?
- What factors influence institutional decision making regarding PSW programs?

This project dovetails with the government desire to support health human resource needs. [Labour Market Alignment, Student Experience, System Composition]

Cost-benefit Analysis of PSE Non-completion *Summer 2025*

HEQCO is developing a cost-benefit analysis to extend our work on PSE non-completion. The framework will 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 for an exploration of potential savings that might be generated from interventions that help support students to program completion. Non-completion is an example of an outcome-focused performance measure that can be used to effectively monitor and measure system performance. [Student Experience, Labour Market Alignment, System Composition]

Labour Market Alignment *Summer 2025*

Ensuring alignment between Ontario PSE programming and the labour market is a priority of students and government. This report will focus on how PSE researchers measure alignment between PSE credentials and the labour market, the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches and how Ontario's government supports PSE/labour market alignment through policy initiatives. [Labour Market Alignment]

Ontario College Program Closures *Summer 2025*

With decreases in international student enrolments and revenue, Ontario colleges face significant financial pressures. Some colleges have announced program and campus closures to address budget shortfalls. This project would review reported program closures in the context of local labour market needs, college mandates and expected increases in domestic enrolments over the next 25 years. It would also consider how colleges can respond to and deliver on their mandates in Ontario's evolving financial context. [Labour Market Alignment, System Composition, Accountability and Performance]

Nursing Enrolment Trends *Summer 2025*

Government has identified an ongoing need for additional trained nurses and other allied health professionals in Ontario. This project will review enrolment and KPI data provided by MCURES for nursing programs to explore observable trends and graduates' outcomes. Where possible, the analysis will consider enrolment by program and institution type. [Labour Market Alignment, System Composition, Student Experience]

Freedom of Speech on Campus *Fall 2025*

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 each institution's annual report and produces a summary of the findings. [Accountability and Performance]

Graduates' Perspectives on Skill Development *Fall 2025*

This project will look at PSE graduates' perspectives of their skill development and preparation for the labour market. This research will expand our understanding of connections between PSE and the labour market. The project will be guided by three questions:

- What do graduates think about their skill development and overall experience of PSE several years post graduation?
- Which skills have been most important in the early years of their career, and did they develop them during PSE?
- Are there differences in perception between graduates from various credentials, disciplines or demographic groups?

Our goal is to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of PSE on graduate outcomes. [Labour Market Alignment, Student Experience]

Post-graduation Settlement Trends *Fall 2025–Winter 2026*

As outlined in MCURES's 2025-26 Letter of Direction, HEQCO will use Statistics Canada's Education and Labour Market Longitudinal Platform (ELMLP) to study where recent Ontario PSE graduates of STEM and non-STEM programs work and reside after graduation. The report will provide the proportion of recent Ontario graduates working in Ontario or other provinces; it will also provide the proportion of graduates who leave Ontario to work outside of Canada. [Labour Market Alignment, Student Experience]

Quick Stats *Ongoing*

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. Keeping this resource up to date and available to the public is made possible through data provided by the MCURES. [Accountability and Performance, Student Experience, System Composition]

Planned Future Projects

Labour Market Outcomes for Graduates with Stacked Credentials

Many Ontario PSE graduates seek further education following completion of a credential. This study would use data from Statistics Canada's ELMLP to examine the earnings outcomes for students with stacked credentials compared to those with a single credential. If possible, this study would also look at differences in earnings of those with stacked credentials by field of study. [Labour Market Alignment]

PSE Affordability

An important element of access is students' and families' understandings of the costs and affordability of PSE. This project would examine different frameworks for conceptualizing and measuring affordability and consider how affordability can be understood in the Ontario context. [Accountability and Performance, Student Experience]

Green Skills

With global economic shifts towards sustainability, there is increasing discussion around the need for green skills in workplace development. There are many program offerings at Ontario colleges and Indigenous Institutes where the overall goal is to equip students with the theory, knowledge and skillset related to these green skills. This project would focus on how Ontario colleges and universities are preparing graduates for jobs requiring green skills, and/or how they are measuring graduates' green skills preparedness. [Labour Market Alignment, Student Experience]

PSE Graduates' Settlement Across Ontario

HEQCO is considering the feasibility of exploring PSE graduates' settlement in Ontario by economic region. This project would extend the work completed as part of HEQCO's 2025-26 Letter of Direction on graduates' settlement. [Student Experience, Labour Market Alignment]

Agency Performance Metrics

As outlined in HEQCO's 2025-26 Letter of Direction, the government expects its agencies to be innovative, sustainable and accountable. The outcome/output-based measurements are intended to track agency progress on addressing government priorities and provide standards for success. Metrics tracking research outcomes are challenging and tracking them effectively is a fraught process. HEQCO will continue to explore potential research outcomes metrics.

HEQCO's performance metrics capture the impact and scope of the research agenda with a focus on improving all aspects of the postsecondary education sector and the responsible, efficient use of public funds. These annual metrics are transparent, output driven, relevant and straightforward.

Research

Research is HEQCO's core business and the basis for any recommendation to MCURES to assist in improving the quality of education provided in the sector, access to PSE and accountability of postsecondary institutions. HEQCO's research is aligned with government priorities and the critical issues facing the sector. These metrics ensure that HEQCO is accountable for a consistent flow of research products and activities that deliver on its mandate. Metrics for reporting research impact are challenging to develop, and strict quantitative measures may not capture the scope and reach of every aspect of this work.

Research output: The number of HEQCO publications, including research reports, government evaluations and assessment projects (including the freedom of speech annual report) and briefing notes.

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, based on current staffing FTE

Communications

HEQCO's communications metrics capture the innovative and accessible activities used to connect with its diverse audience. All HEQCO research is made available through the

agency website in accessible and bilingual digital formats. HEQCO's commitment to sharing its work publicly helps inform MCURES as well as institutional leaders, faculty, students, employers and the public, and allows for informed discussions addressing the difficult challenges and opportunities facing the sector.

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

Target: 5% growth from previous year

Website traffic/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

Operations and 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 and ensures sustainability for the agency. 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: The 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: Delivering 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

Financial Requirements

Approximately 85% of HEQCO's \$4.1 million operating budget is allocated to internal and external research, which is the core business of the agency. The remaining funds support Council governance, executive services and administration of the agency. HEQCO is focused on staff development and continuing to build research capacity and productivity. There are three key drivers for the three-year financial forecast:

- The HEQCO conference is scheduled to be held in person again on November 7, 2025, in Toronto. The three-year financial forecast includes projections for revenue and costs associated with a future conference targeted for the fall of 2027.
- HEQCO continues to demonstrate the strategic advantage of the remote agency operating model. HEQCO received confirmation in 2023 that the agency would be exempt from the Community Jobs Initiative.
- The financial forecast includes the request for an additional \$400k in funding for 2027-28 fiscal year to maintain investment in both internal and external research.

HEQCO's research budget supports program evaluation work on behalf of the MCURES as required through the annual Letter of Direction. The full-time equivalent (FTE) count for the 2025-26 cycle remains unchanged from 2024-25. As a virtual agency there are no provisions for commissioning or operating costs associated with an office location in this budget submission. HEQCO requests that its current base budget of \$4.1 million be preserved for the 2025-26 cycle.

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. HEQCO continues to receive clean audit opinions from the auditors in their annual reports, 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 of Directors each quarter with updated mitigation strategies and actions taken to ensure appropriate risk management.

HEQCO completes the annual agency risk assessment required by Treasury Board Secretariat and identifies no "high risk" areas associated with HEQCO operations.

The HEQCO Board of Directors is comprised of only three voting members. HEQCO developed a board member skills matrix to assist the Minister in the future recruitment of members with the knowledge and experience needed to support the board's oversight role. The matrix identifies the current strengths of existing members, and the key areas of expertise needed to support agency governance and accountability. The skills matrix is provided to the Minister's office to assist in the selection of the most appropriate candidates to for appointment to the board.

HEQCO does not engage with the public using AI interfaces and therefore does not collect or maintain any information which requires specific risk mitigation measures or controls. HEQCO staff are required to use only Microsoft Co-pilot AI internally as directed through the agency guidance for responsible use of AI. HEQCO does not use AI in the development or delivery of, or decision-making for, an agency-specific policy, program, or service in compliance with the directive issued in November 2024.

Staff Retention and Development

HEQCO makes considerable investments in the selection, training and professional development of our 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; talent management (including performance assessments); mentoring; professional development opportunities; media interview and accessible writing skills; and opportunities for project management and leadership skills development. Data analysis and software training as well as cultural competency and sensitivity training are part of HEQCO's commitment to staff development.

HEQCO conducted an HR review in 2021, which reviewed the organizational structure and benchmarked salaries to both the Ontario Public Service and other relevant provincial agencies and sector associations. HEQCO's compensation adjustments are approved annually by the board following an organization-wide performance review process conducted in late November.

HEQCO has twenty FTE staff encompassing research, administration and governance functions. In addition, HEQCO continues to provide five work-integrated learning opportunities, totalling an additional 3.5 FTE positions, for Ontario postsecondary students and recent graduates through HEQCO's internship program. Operating flexibility is achieved with fixed-term contract employees and work-integrated learning placements. HEQCO does not employ consultants as part of the team conducting internal research

projects. HEQCO reports detailed workforce data as required to Treasury Board Secretariat through the e-agency portal in compliance with the Agencies and Appointments Directive.

HEQCO's staff work remotely and have developed and embraced processes and new technology to ensure HEQCO is able to operate flexibly and efficiently in this virtual environment. HEQCO continues to attract talent from the Toronto area, however the virtual operation of the agency has seen the recruitment of staff extending well outside of the Greater Toronto Area. HEQCO continues to monitor and evaluate staffing and any future need for a physical location, but currently the agency prefers to remain a virtual agency.

Communications Plan

HEQCO's research provides evidence and guidance to support the Minister and the broader MCURES, and it is consumed by a diverse audience of institutional leaders, faculty, students, employers and the public. To reach these PSE interested readers, all materials are produced in bilingual and accessible formats and are available on HEQCO's website. These include reader-friendly summaries of research reports and briefs and appropriate background materials.

To increase awareness of the research, resources and commentary content, HEQCO communicates with its audience in the following ways:

- Newsletter distribution every two weeks (with breaks during holiday periods) to the HEQCO mailing list. Anyone can sign up to join and the newsletter is produced separately in both English and French.
- Ongoing use of social media, including LinkedIn, X, BlueSky and Facebook with a focus on the latest work and material that is timely to news and discussion in the sector.
- In-person presentations at conferences, sector meetings and partner events.

The effectiveness of communications activities is assessed through website analytics on readership of research products and overall audience growth, which are included as part of the agency's KPIs.

There are no advertising/marketing activities planned outside of promotion of the HEQCO conference taking place in November 2025. Advertising on social media and relevant sector media is a necessary component of reaching revenue targets for the event.

Appendix 1: An estimate of financial resources needed for 2025–2028.

Appendix 2: Risk Assessment Reporting Tool for 2024-25 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

		2025/2026	2026/2027	2027/2028	Notes
	Account Descriptions	Forecast	Forecast	Forecast	#
REVENUE	Transfer Payments	4,100.0	4,100.0	4,500.0	1
	Less Capital Purchases	17.0	17.5	18.0	
	Conference Registration Revenue	52.8	-	55.0	2
	Deferred Revenue	15.5	16.0	16.5	
	Interest	22.5	20.0	17.5	
	Total Revenue	4,173.8	4,118.5	4,571.0	
EXPENSES	Council Governance & Executive Services	9.8%	9.7%	8.9%	
	Board per diem	7.6	6.6	6.6	
	Salaries & benefits	376.5	367.9	374.4	6
	Travel & Communications	5.0	4.0	5.0	
	Services, supplies and equipment	20.1	20.5	21.1	4,5,8
	Depreciation expenses	1.7	1.7	1.7	
	sub total	410.97	400.68	408.79	
	Research	85.2%	85.2%	86.3%	
	Research contracts, seminars & workshop, data purchases, translation, communications	782.1	672.8	1,030.3	2
	salaries & benefits	2,451.4	2,505.0	2,575.6	6
	Travel & communications	15.0	14.0	15.0	
	Services, supplies and equipment	292.5	298.4	307.3	4,5,8
	Depreciation Expenses	17.0	17.0	17.0	
	sub total	3,558.0	3,507.2	3,945.2	
	Administration	4.9%	5.1%	4.7%	
	salaries and benefits	189.6	195.3	201.1	6
	Travel & communications	0.3	0.2	0.3	
	Services, Supplies and equipment	13.6	13.8	14.3	4,5,8
	Depreciation Expenses	1.3	1.3	1.3	
	sub total	204.7	210.6	217.0	
	Total Resource Requirements	4,173.8	4,118.5	4,571.0	

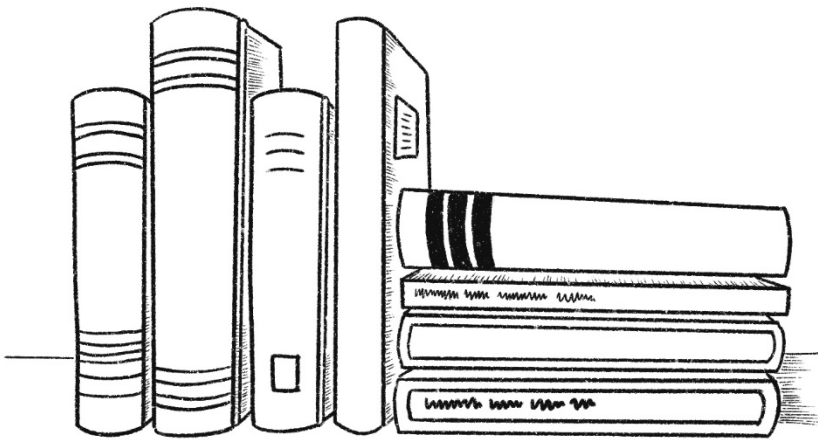
Notes

- 1 The budget plan for 2025-2028 is based on an annual allocation of \$4.1 million for 25/26 and 26/27 and a request for a funding increase to \$4.5 million for 27/28.
- 2 HEQCO plans to host a conference biennially 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 25/26 and 26/27 and 3% in 27/28.
- 6 Salaries and benefits are 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 4% in 25/26, and 3% in 26/27 and 27/28 as per the terms of BDO Canada LLP.
- 9 HEQCO's current FTE headcount is 23.5.
- 10 Forecasts for 2025-2028 fiscal years include estimates and assumptions.
- 11 Annual budgets are reviewed and approved by the board each year.

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. Reference the OPS Risk Assessment	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. a) Start with the <RISK> b) Then indicate the <EVENT/ROOT CAUSE>	<i>Optional</i> Describe the root cause(s) of the risk. The root cause is the core issue that sets in motion	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	Indicate the likelihood of the risk occurring after Existing Controls in Column F are considered. Selections include: Rare (1) Unlikely (2) Possible (3) Moderate (4) High (5)	Indicate the impact of the risk after Existing Controls in Column F are considered. Selections include: Insignificant (1) Minor (2) Moderate (3) Major (4) Catastrophic (5)	The risk score and status are automatically calculated with the formula of Residual Likelihood (Column H) x Residual Impact (Column I)	Determine the most appropriate Risk Treatment Approach. Selections include: Accept Mitigate Transfer Avoid Accept to assess 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 list them separately with the word "and"	Specify the date when each action will be completed. Additional context should be added in the Comments (Column O).	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	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 when requirements have been met. • If Action is now "Delayed", specify the reason for delay.
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 fulfill 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 annual letter of direction to incorporate objectives outlined in the letter of direction into HEQCO's business plan.	Ongoing control	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Reputational	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 put controversial and difficult discussions into the mix. The commitment to evidence-based research maintains confidence in HEQCO's contribution to the sector. 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 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 control	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 audit. 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 control	OnTrack	
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. Requirements 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 DOA framework is reviewed annually by the board. 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 control	OnTrack	
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 are organized 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 control	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Strategic/Governance	Internal governance and development of the 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 binder including foundation documents that define roles/responsibilities and include government policies and directives. CEO and staff roles are defined by job descriptions. CEO and board members attend ethics and governance training. Board members are required to sign a 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 control	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 KPI's or measures are not relevant.		Performance goals are set out in HEQCO's letter of direction, outlined in the Business and Research Plan. KPI's are established in the Business Plan and 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 HEQCO's KPI's and Business Plan.	Ongoing control	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 processing services. Financial staff cross-check each other's work for all transactions. A second level of review 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 and 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 control	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 HEQCO'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 align funding allocation with the budget. Action 2: The Ministry and HEQCO have worked to establish a first quarter installment payment process to ensure HEQCO is able to meet it's operational commitments in the first quarter.	Ongoing control	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/I&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 IT service provider hosts HEQCO data in a secure location with three server locations to ensure file server redundancy. The IT system structure has been mapped to ensure redundancy and security. Staff are aware of IT policies and processes re: safe storage of data. Multifactor authentication of users now implemented accross HEQCO as well as updated Microsoft Intune protection. Documents are retained and backed-up electronically. All new HEQCO records are digital and retention policies are followed. All staff are trained on records 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 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 Microsoft Intune protections.	Ongoing control	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 competitions. 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 control	On Track	
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO)	Operational/I&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 control	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 upcoming appointment expiration dates 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 control	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 freezes threaten operations and the 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, HEQCO attempts 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 or external cost recovery from the Ministry through transfer payment agreements.	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 fulfill its responsibility to examine, understand and recommend improvements to postsecondary access, student mobility, and student success due to lack of access to the Ontario Education Number (OEN) databases held by government. HEQCO research projects are at risk due to lack of timely access to data sources. 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. HEQCO is 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 efforts by MCU to facilitate limited access to aggregate data compiled within MCU. HEQCO continues to engage with MCU on the data sharing agreement to gain additional access to data sets in order to end reliance on less complete and less robust sources of institutional and government data to allow the best possible research. 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 through the data sharing agreement to provide timely access to data to enable research projects to be completed.	Ongoing control	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 control	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 ontracts are strictly monitored. Cost over-rides 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 control	On Track	



Appendix 3: HEQCO Research Framework

2024–2027

*Updated for 2025–28 Business Plan

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, Universities, Research Excellence and Security (MCURES), 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 MCURES, we provided advice to the Minister's office on urgent policy questions. We look forward to collaborating with MCURES 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 priorities 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 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 (AI) 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 and 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. Public college/private provider (PCPP) partnerships proliferated in the Greater Toronto Area between 2018 and 2024 but are likely to disappear with reductions in international student enrolments. Funding for Ontario PSE is also changing: New Strategic Mandate Agreements (SMAs) are set to be launched in 2025-26 and the government has planned a funding review for 2026-27.

Federal and provincial policy decisions are shaping international student enrolment across Canada. In its 2014 International Education Strategy, the federal government outlined steps to leverage postsecondary pathways toward achieving new immigration goals and addressing shortages of highly skilled workers. Institutions operated as entry points for newcomers and Post-Graduate Work Permits (PGWPs) helped international students gain work experience needed for permanent residency. In Ontario, international student tuition was a tool for increasing institutional revenue in an environment marked by financial constraint and increasing costs. International student enrolment growth in Ontario 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 explicitly supported increased international enrolment to ensure that institutions were able to balance budgets and deliver their mandates.

In 2024, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada announced changes to Canada's international education framework, including limits on study permit applications by province, changes to PGWP eligibility and an increase in the cost-of-living requirement. These changes resulted in sharp reductions in international student enrolment in 2024-25. Reduced international enrolments are affecting PSE revenue across the sectors but are particularly impactful for Ontario colleges: Many have announced program and campus closures to address budget shortfalls.

Ontario's PSE sector is in a precarious financial position. Provincial expenditures per full-time equivalent (FTE) student in Ontario remain the lowest in Canada. MCURES 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 and restrictions on international student enrolment. 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. Without revenue from international tuition to fill budget gaps, postsecondary institutions may not have the capacity to provide the programming Ontario students and employers are seeking. 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, the provincial 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. The provincial 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 (PCCs) 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.

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. In partnership with Indigenous Institutes and leaders, research is needed to advance the governments' goals for ensuring opportunities for Indigenous 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 understanding of equitable access and success.

Accountability and Performance

The provincial government established a system for accountability, transparency and performance in the 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 the Ontario 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, governments and institutions are focused on graduates' pathways to the labour market.

In Ontario, the government's focus on the labour market can explicitly be seen in funding opportunities and SMA accountabilities. The 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 MCURES, 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 MCURES, 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, MCURES and institutional data 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 MCURES to streamline a request process

under our Data Sharing Agreement. We will also press MCURES 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. The provincial 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 the government's efforts to ensure high-quality student learning experiences and outcomes, support institutional innovation and strengthen connections between employers and graduates.