

Stakeholder Summary

Degree granting distinctions are important, but regional factors are also driving differentiation among Ontario colleges

In contrast to Ontario's university sector, colleges in the province are difficult to cluster into groups as they tend to have individually defining characteristics based on local factors such as geography, demographic demand for programs/credentials and regional labour market needs, according to a new report, *Differentiation within the Ontario College System: Options and Opportunities*.

In 2013, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) published [a report on differentiation among Ontario colleges](#) that found the issue of degree granting dominated the system planning conversation. The new report examining the options and opportunities for differentiation in the college sector finds that while degree granting is still a prominent factor when examining how colleges are distinct from each other, the influence of regional factors is also powerful.

Project Description

Similar to HEQCO's most recent analysis of [differentiation in Ontario's university sector](#), *Differentiation within the Ontario College System: Options and Opportunities* compiled available data on the extent of differentiation in the province's colleges in four categories: equity of access, demand and demographics, student experience and graduate outcomes.

Findings

Regardless of their location, Ontario colleges perform consistently well in ensuring equitable access, although each institution may have specific strengths in helping underrepresented groups. The high level of college attainment is a significant reason that the province has one of the highest shares of adults with a postsecondary credential, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Degree granting and graduate certificates are a significant distinguishing feature among colleges. The institutions most active in providing degree opportunities were also among the top scorers for demand and demographics variables. However, these schools were also in urban areas, such as the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), which are experiencing sustained trends of population growth for those in the traditional age-range of attending postsecondary education, a factor that may also be driving the demand. The colleges most active in degree and graduate certificate credentials also showed a slight concentration near the bottom of the scores for learning journey and graduate outcomes, which is worthy of further examination.

Ontario's small, rural and northern colleges are "quiet powerhouses" performing well on student experience and graduate outcomes scores. Student satisfaction scores are often higher for smaller

institutions, but at a time when overall employment rates are lower in rural and northern regions the strong graduate outcomes measures are surprising.

While institutions were differentiated from each other, their levels of performance within the examined categories did not vary widely, suggesting that colleges were relatively well-rounded and showed some strength in most areas.

The data in the report provides further context to ongoing provincial discussions of system design and differentiation, as the Strategic Mandate Agreements process develops. “We invite the institutions themselves, along with government, to consider what this means for students and society more generally and whether differentiated institutions, and the students they serve, are best served by a policy environment that still treats them essentially as identical.”

Differentiation within the Ontario College System: Options and Opportunities is written by Amy Kaufman, Linda Jonker and Martin Hicks, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.