Stakeholder summary

College degree granting dominates differentiation discussion

While degree granting by Ontario colleges is barely a decade old and only 4% of the province’s college students are enrolled in degree programs, the topic dominates current discussions about college differentiation. A new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) says that moving the discussion forward requires the province to set objectives and forge a plan for college degree granting.

“Would differentiation further strengthen the colleges’ contributions and performance? The active debate within the college community on this question is around degree granting,” says HEQCO in the report: The Diversity of Ontario’s Colleges: A Data Set to Inform the Differentiation Discussion. With the growth of college degree capacity, particularly in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the authors say the time has come to reassess the purpose and focus of the Ontario college system. “A growth and differentiation plan – what kinds of college degrees, where offered and how situated in the overall provincial degree landscape – follows from the objective-setting exercise.”

Previous HEQCO reports have found that a more differentiated Ontario postsecondary system would improve performance and sustainability, enabling each institution to make a distinctive contribution to the system while enhancing quality and choice for postsecondary students.

Project description

The current report, which follows on a similar HEQCO examination of the university sector, explores the diversity of Ontario’s colleges and based on the data, identifies potential frameworks that could assist the development of a more differentiated postsecondary system.

Findings

In addition to degree granting, regional programmatic diversity is a distinguishing factor among Ontario colleges. The report notes that individual colleges are well recognized for their specialized programs, providing opportunities for neighbouring colleges to plan around those programs and avoid an unsustainable duplication of expertise and infrastructure.

Research activity is less promising as a point of differentiation in Ontario’s colleges, according to the report, in that there may not yet be sufficient applied research volume and maturity to meaningfully measure differentiation. However, a stronger and more universal credit transfer mechanism between colleges and between colleges and universities is needed to achieve meaningful differentiation.

Acknowledging that degree-level education is a recognized delineator in many college and polytechnic systems, the report says its growth in Ontario colleges is variable, with some institutions expanding degree granting with considerable momentum while others are more cautious or have opted not to offer degrees. The greatest momentum is in the GTA at Humber, Sheridan, Seneca and George Brown
colleges, a region of the province that has more student demand for degree programs than spaces for them. The authors note that any examination of future growth and focus should involve the GTA universities.

**Recommendations**

“The more degree-level activity at colleges, the greater the urgency to ensure that its evolution becomes defined, makes sense to students, is of a high standard of degree-level quality and is successfully connected both to educational partners and to the labour market,” says the report, cautioning that degree granting decisions must avoid devaluing degrees or creating a second-class status within and among Ontario’s postsecondary sectors.

Creating objectives and a growth plan for Ontario’s colleges would allow government to effectively address degree-level education and institutional differentiation, says the report, while shifting the planning focus “to the full range of critical offerings, including skills upgrading, apprenticeship, and vocational certificate and diploma programs that Ontario needs from its stellar college system.”

Authors of *The Diversity of Ontario’s Colleges: A Data Set to Inform the Differentiation Discussion* are Martin Hicks, Harvey P. Weingarten, Linda Jonker and Shuping Liu, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.