

Stakeholder Summary

Intermediary bodies useful to advancing postsecondary quality and sustainability

An intermediary or “buffer” body between government and postsecondary institutions can help promote both higher quality and financial sustainability, according to a new report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO).

Defined by report author David Trick as a government agency “that occupies a zone of relative independence between the government and the higher education institutions,” intermediary bodies can be either advisory or regulatory and can help shape objectives and build long-term political support for implementation, “especially when the decisions required could be politically sensitive.”

Project description

The Role of Intermediary Funding Bodies in Enhancing Quality and Sustainability in Higher Education explores the evidence about intermediary bodies through case studies in England, Israel, New Zealand and the United States – all having substantial literature on the roles and effectiveness of intermediary bodies and similar higher education systems to Ontario’s. The study also reviews Ontario’s experience with intermediary bodies.

Findings

The literature suggests that intermediary bodies can play a useful role in higher education policy and administration. While many intermediary bodies were established initially to manage growth, more recently they have been reoriented to managing fixed or declining resources and flat or declining enrolments. The case studies suggest that intermediary bodies in England, Israel, New Zealand and, to a lesser extent, the United States positively influence quality and sustainability while insulating allocation decisions from the pressures of constituency-based politics.

In all of the jurisdictions studied, the intermediary body complements specialized staff, either in a self-standing ministry or within a department of education, and supports the government in developing policies for steering the higher education system. Depending on the jurisdiction, the potential strengths of intermediary bodies relative to government departments may include greater availability of executive time to deal with multiple stakeholders; specialized staff with advanced training in higher education policy; the capacity to pursue a policy direction continuously over time; and a capacity to make judgments based on qualitative information that cannot be reduced to formulas. The report also notes that such bodies can insulate government from controversial decisions.

An intermediary body could be helpful as the Ontario government seeks to pursue quality and sustainability through its differentiation policy framework. Specifically, such a body could be useful for pursuing and eventually renewing the province’s Strategic Mandate Agreements; for strategic allocation of funding (particularly research funds); making fair and evidence-based decisions on controversial

allocation issues; and identifying/incentivizing opportunities for cooperation between institutions to maintain access and quality while reducing unnecessary duplication.

“With the best of wills, higher education institutions do not change quickly or easily. Yet the nature of government makes sustained policy implementation difficult,” says Trick, acknowledging that an intermediary body “may provide an important device by which strategic policies can be made to work over time.”

Author David Trick is president of David Trick and Associates Inc., consultants in higher education strategy and management.