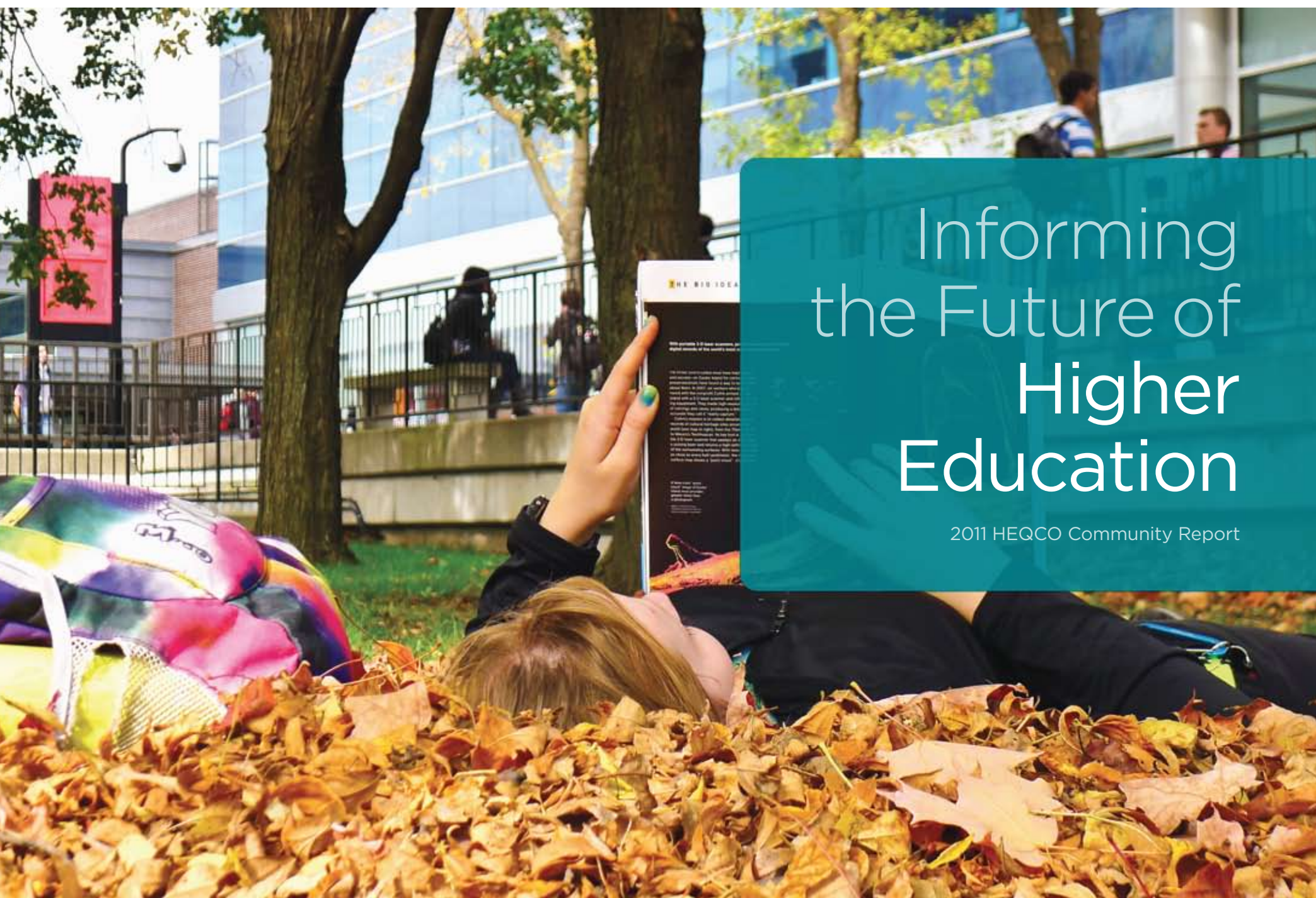




# Informing the Future of Higher Education

2011 HEQCO Community Report



# Welcome to your future

Bringing you the latest evidence-based research on the trends that are shaping postsecondary education.

Informing the Future of Higher Education is not only the name of this first community report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), it is also our ambition and the purpose behind the more than 126 research studies we have conducted or commissioned since we became operational in 2007 as an arm's-length agency of the Government of Ontario. As part of its mandate, HEQCO evaluates the postsecondary sector and provides policy recommendations to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities to enhance the access, quality and accountability of Ontario higher education. We also inform the public about our evidence-based research, and among the questions our research explores are those asked in this report by Ontarians just like you—people who have their own ambitions, dreams and goals. The evidence is clear: postsecondary education can inform their future.

—Frank Iacobucci, Chair & Harvey Weingarten, President and CEO, Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario

## Will I be able to go to college or university?

If you want to, chances are you will. Enrolments at Ontario's colleges, universities and trade/apprenticeship programs are at record levels, amid growing awareness of the lifetime benefits. Economically, the evidence is unequivocal. Postsecondary education (PSE) graduates have lower unemployment rates and higher average annual earnings than those who only complete high school.

However, students who come from lower-income families, families with no history of PSE participation, have a disability, or are Aboriginal, are less likely to pursue higher education and are underrepresented in our colleges and universities.

Students from under-represented groups are slightly more reluctant to take out loans for PSE, according to the study *Willingness to Pay*, which may be a consequence of underestimating the future benefits of their education. The study suggests that a reluctance to pursue loans and grants might prompt some people—especially those who have few alternative funding sources other than student loans—to conclude that PSE is unaffordable and decide not to enrol.

According to the study *From Postsecondary Application to the Labour Market: The Pathways of Under-represented Groups*, students from these groups who pursue PSE are more likely to have jobs and family obligations while they attend school, and are more concerned about balancing school and employment. They are less likely to receive



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## If I could, I would love to go to both university and arts college.

but financially that's a lot....Unfortunately, I don't think high school guidance offices get people involved early enough so there's a scramble in grade 12. My friends are in the same position I am so I don't learn that much from them. We are in it together in terms of finding out what to do.

Moya Garrison-Msingwana, Oakwood Collegiate



financial support from family, and are more likely to borrow from private sources rather than government programs to fund their education.

### PSE is a family affair

What influences students the most when it comes to attending college or university? Whether their parents attended a postsecondary institution.

In fact, parental education may be the most consistently and uniformly important determinant of who goes to college or university, according to two recent studies (*Under-represented Groups in Postsecondary Education in Ontario: Evidence from the Youth in Transition Survey* and *Access to Postsecondary Education: How Ontario Compares*). The studies found that a single year of parental education has a greater positive impact on the likelihood of a son or daughter attending a postsecondary institution than does an extra \$50,000 in annual parental income.



# College has done an incredible job of keeping things very realistic.

It answers the question “how will I get a job” and “how will I maintain that job.”... The “soft skills” are the most important to me, the leadership and team-building, and the networking and business relationships. Jessica Smyth, Mohawk College

While access discussions often tend to focus on financial constraints such as tuition levels, loans and grants, the studies’ authors say that attention should also be paid to improving student motivation and performance at or before the high school level. These and other studies point to the importance of educating students and their families about the costs and benefits of education, increasing awareness of financial aid programs and exploring early interventions that address the significant non-financial barriers to PSE—such as negative attitudes towards education and lack of family or community support.

## Making it to the finish line

Even in overcoming these barriers, some students who begin college or university studies end up dropping out. The current graduation rate for Ontario colleges is about 65 per cent, and over 79 per cent for university. While there is insufficient provincial data on precisely how many students transfer to another institution, leave but return to school or leave permanently, national statistics indicate that some 20 per cent of college students and 15 per cent of university students enrolled fail to graduate within five years. Here too,

early interventions could have a significant impact, in this case by identifying current PSE students who might be at risk of dropping out.

The recent study *Shifting from Retention Rates to Retention Risk: An Alternative Approach for Managing Institutional Student Retention Performance*, found that a pre-emptive approach could enable institutions to intervene before the student drops out. Among potential risk factors, according to the study: students who are attending part time, are not attending postsecondary institutions on scholarships or bursaries, have lower high school grades and/or have not declared a major.

## Breaking down the barriers

Focusing on PSE accessibility and success is critical, as nearly three quarters of new jobs will require some form of postsecondary education. Currently, Ontario is leading the country in PSE attainment—64 per cent of Ontarians ages 25 to 64 hold a postsecondary (college, university, apprenticeship or trade) credential. Canada’s ability to meet future demands for skilled workers depends on continued growth in postsecondary participation rates. Among the best opportunities for that growth are increasing access and reducing barriers for groups that are currently underrepresented in our postsecondary institutions.

## Will I graduate with the skills I need to be successful personally and professionally?

While there’s growing interest in measuring quality in Ontario postsecondary education, for many students, the ultimate measures come after graduation—in the job market. And job prospects are considerably better for those with a PSE credential. According to Statistics Canada, the unemployment rate in 2010 for those aged 25 to 44 without any PSE was 10.9 per cent versus 6.3 per cent for those with a PSE credential.

The study *Postsecondary Education and the Labour Market in Ontario* found that graduates are not only finding jobs; they’re out-earning high school graduates by almost 25 per cent, and the gap between earnings has more than doubled in the last 20 years. While the number of university graduates in Ontario has increased markedly since 1986, the study found no signs of a general over-supply of highly educated labour (such as declining relative wages or greater likelihood of unemployment).

If earnings are a proxy for success, what you earn may depend on what you learn, according to the study *Exploring the Alignment between Postsecondary Programs and Labour Market Outcomes in Ontario*. Generally, graduates of engineering and computer

### DID YOU KNOW?

- 64 Per cent of Ontarians ages 25-64 holding a postsecondary credential
- 120K Number of apprentices learning trades in Ontario
- 87 Per cent of Ontario college students who are satisfied or very satisfied with the knowledge and skills acquired from their programs
- 60K Number of new student spaces at Ontario colleges and universities by 2015-2016



science programs have the highest earnings within two years of graduation, followed by graduates of health, and business and commerce programs. Earnings in the engineering and mathematics/computer science fields have increased significantly in recent years, according to the study, even though there has been no real growth in the number of graduates in these areas, suggesting greater career opportunities in these technology-oriented fields.

Getting a good job is one driver of graduate satisfaction, but according to the study *What are the Influencers of Graduate Satisfaction and Labour Market Outcomes on Ontario College Graduates?* what happens on campus is almost as important as what happens later in the job market. The study finds that factors such as the relevance of course content and the quality of instruction have nearly the same impact on graduates' satisfaction.

**Teaching Matters**

So it's no accident that HEQCO researchers are exploring effective teaching and learning. As the book *Taking Stock: Research on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (based on a HEQCO-sponsored research symposium) noted, much is known about so-called student-focused approaches to learning, where students are actively involved rather than passive recipients. But the book's authors say current postsecondary teaching practice isn't reflecting this knowledge and they call for the wide-scale adoption of effective teaching practice informed by this research.

Postsecondary educators appear eager to embrace the challenge even if they believe that research is more valued by their institutions. In the study *University Faculty Engagement in Teaching Development Activities Phase II*, almost 96 per cent of tenured faculty surveyed at six Ontario universities said that teaching is important or very important to their professional practice, while more than 70 per cent believe research has a bigger payoff than teaching in enhancing reputation and accessing funds. Nonetheless, the study found that faculty actively engage in teaching improvement, using both formal and informal methods including their institutional teaching/learning resource centres.

In partnership with universities and colleges from across the province, HEQCO has launched 13 research projects to evaluate innovative and effective teaching/learning practices over the next two years. The projects will also raise system-wide awareness of programs and techniques that have a proven impact on student success.

**Hard to succeed without soft skills**

Critical to that success are the skills that students acquire during their college or university education. According to the report *A Fine Balance: Supporting Skills and Competency Development*, among the most important skills and capabilities identified by employers are so-called soft skills: communications, teamwork, integrity, intellectual and organizational ability, confidence and character. And according to the graduate satisfaction study, students also value these soft skills, considering them to be as important as specific job-related skills.

A recent HEQCO-sponsored conference brought together international experts on postsecondary learning assessment. *Measuring the Value of a Postsecondary Education* (visit [heqco.ca](http://heqco.ca) for an overview of the findings) explored ways to identify and measure the outcomes of a postsecondary education. The conference reflects HEQCO's international scope in identifying, evaluating and sharing best practice in postsecondary access, quality and accountability.

Institutions and the Ontario postsecondary system as a whole are already accountable in a variety of input/output measures such as entering grades, enrolment numbers and graduation rates. More recently, student satisfaction and engagement surveys have been added to the postsecondary institutional accountability mix. Ontario colleges utilize provincially mandated key performance indicators to measure the satisfaction of students, graduates and employers as well as each college's graduation and employment rates.

More than 87 per cent of Ontario college students surveyed in 2008 said they were satisfied or very satisfied with the knowledge and skills they were acquiring from their programs. For university undergraduate students, results from the U.S.-based National Survey of Student Engagement (which includes measures of the time and effort that students invest in their education) place Ontario slightly ahead of other provinces but somewhat behind American counterparts in key benchmarks including student-faculty interaction and enriching educational experiences.



**I think universities are much more competitive than they were in our day.**

Our children will be faced with much more competition than we were 20 years ago.... I would hope that each child is able to pursue their passion in an environment which is both intellectually and personally nurturing. Alexandra Kyriakos, parent

As the report *Student Engagement as a Quality Measure in the Ontario Postsecondary Education System* notes, colleges and universities want reliable data to help them identify effective educational practices as well as areas for improvement that will keep students in school, improve their academic performance and increase graduation rates.

**What will postsecondary education look like by the time my kids get there?**

Look for increased diversity in the student mix, continued enrolment growth, greater student mobility between institutions and technology-enabled changes to program delivery.

Continued immigration and growth in the number of adult learners will impact PSE over the next 10 years, according to HEQCO research, as will efforts to increase participation by groups that are currently underrepresented. Anticipating the growth, the Ontario

government announced a plan to create 60,000 new student spaces at colleges and universities by 2015-2016.

Ontario is the lead destination for Canadian immigrants, and their children are more likely to go to college or university than children whose parents were born in Canada. The study *Pathways of Immigrant Youth*, finds that immigrants tend to have high expectations for success, which motivates their children to succeed. The influence is most evident in East Asian immigrants and least evident in Caribbean and Latin American immigrants.

Tomorrow's enrolment numbers could be even higher if the PSE participation gap between men and women continues to close. According to *What About the Boys? An Overview of Gender Trends in Education and the Labour Market in Ontario*, while the percentages of male and female students going to college or university have increased, the rate of increase has been greater for females, who comprised approximately 55 per cent of college and university applications in 2007. The report notes, however, that the 20-year trend may be stabilizing as growth in the gender gap slows.

### The changing face of PSE

Adult learners will also contribute to changes in PSE enrolment, program delivery and services. Research shows that the highest proportion of Ontarians with unmet education or training needs is in the 25 to 54 age group. And even for well-educated and employed adults, advancements in technology and rapidly changing skill requirements will make it increasingly necessary to pursue new skills and upgrade existing ones.

Those same technological advances are already reshaping how and where students learn. A HEQCO forum on teaching strategies for large classes found that innovative teachers and new technologies could render extinct the traditional lecture-only approach to large-enrolment classes. From downloadable interactive lectures to on-line course communities – new techniques are personalizing learning and sparking creativity in classes large and small, whether on-site or by distance learning.

### Options for diverse student needs

If current trends continue, tomorrow's PSE system will reflect growing diversity in student educational pathways, offering more flexibility and mobility between educational institutions. The HEQCO study *Forging Pathways: Students Who Transfer Between Ontario Colleges and Universities* found that the number of students continuing their education by transferring between colleges and universities has increased over the last decade.

Almost 8 per cent of college graduates furthered their education in a degree program in 2008-2009, up from 5.3 per cent in 2001-2002. The percentage of college students who are university graduates has also increased: 10 per cent in 2009-2010 compared to 8 per cent a decade earlier. Students are voting with their feet, and the provincial government has responded, allocating almost \$74 million over five years to implement a credit transfer system that will help students complete their studies sooner, create new credit transfer pathways, provide greater supports for transfer students and better information about opportunities available to them.

The global trend in PSE is toward encouraging participation, allowing students a choice of programs with opportunities for changing direction, and supporting those who want to update or enhance their knowledge and skills. According to the study, *Encouraging Participation: Trends in Pathways to Postsecondary Education*, higher education is becoming more attuned to ever-evolving skills in the labour market, moving toward a system that offers diverse pathways through all postsecondary options in partnerships with students, parents, community partners, business and industry.

### The idea is working

Ontario's postsecondary sector is already seeing more participation in work-based learning programs ranging from cooperative education to apprenticeships. A recent Ipsos Reid survey found that almost a quarter of Ontarians with some postsecondary experience have participated in co-op education alone; proportionately more than any other Canadian province. And with the establishment of the Ontario College of Trades in 2009, Ontario is expanding its focus on the apprenticeship and skilled trades system, where currently more than 120,000 apprentices are learning trades. HEQCO research finds that postsecondary institutions and the employers involved in work-integrated learning view it as an important part of the student experience, preparing students to enter the labour market with relevant, transferable and marketable skills.

Today's trends suggest that tomorrow's postsecondary institutions will focus on improving the skills students will need for their personal and professional lives. According to the research report *A Fine Balance: Supporting Skills and Competency Development*, there is growing emphasis on innovative and creative skills such as literacy in information and communications technology, mathematics, entrepreneurialism and social skills, augmented by global perspectives, language skills and cultural sensitivity.

### A student-centered system

HEQCO research also serves as a catalyst for discussion and debate on the future of postsecondary education. According to the HEQCO-commissioned book *Academic Transformation: The Forces Reshaping Higher Education in Ontario*, the province's universities have gravitated from primarily teaching-based to so-called research-intensive institutions, "the most costly, volatile and risky model of university education." As a result, universities have struggled to balance the high costs of generating research-based knowledge with the growing enrolment of students who have diverse backgrounds, needs and learning styles. The authors say the PSE system and its students could benefit from a greater variety of degree granting institutions, such as those that focus primarily on undergraduate teaching, offer three-year and pre-professional degrees, that create a greater role for colleges in degree-granting and increase focus on trades training and underprepared learners.

If the future of higher education is a more student-centered and responsive system, one that gives students greater clarity on which institutions best serve their career and personal goals, system adjustments will be required. Another catalyst of discussion is the HEQCO report *The Benefits of Greater Differentiation of Ontario's University Sector*, which challenges universities to be accountable based on their mission and priorities, to set measureable goals based on their strengths, and to expect that new provincial funding will hinge on whether those goals are met. The report says that this differentiated approach would produce a postsecondary system that is "more cohesive, more fluid, more sustainable and higher quality."

### Informing the future

HEQCO research will continue to inform thinking and decision-making on key issues around access, quality and accountability in Ontario's postsecondary sector, with particular emphasis on those groups that are currently underrepresented in the system. Among projects in the coming year, we will continue to explore socio-cultural barriers to PSE with a focus on under-represented groups, as well as educational pathways for adult learners and the state of access for Ontario's highest academic achievers. Our quality-based research will explore teaching effectiveness, measurement of learning outcomes and doctoral degree-holder alignment with labour markets. From an accountability perspective, HEQCO research will further the discussion on differentiated funding models and financial sustainability of institutions and the postsecondary sector, informed by best practices throughout the world. Finally, in partnership with Ontario's PSE institutions and community groups, HEQCO will expand its involvement in interventions to address gaps in postsecondary access.

The studies referenced in this report to the community are but a few of the 30 research reports issued by HEQCO in 2010-11, with another 40 underway for release in the coming year. Since 2007 when HEQCO first became operational, we will have conducted or commissioned 126 research studies in postsecondary access, quality and accountability. Let HEQCO keep you current with the latest evidence-based research on the trends in access, quality and accountability that are shaping postsecondary education.

► Find out more at [heqco.ca](http://heqco.ca)

Watch video interviews with Moya, Jessica and Alexandra. While you're there, share your views. And to keep current with the trends shaping postsecondary education, join our mailing list. It's your future.