



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

OCUFA Response – HEQCO Differentiation Report October 26, 2010

- “Differentiation”, when applied to Ontario’s university system, can mean a variety of different things. OCUFA takes it to mean a system where university communities (including administrators, faculty, staff and students) are free to develop specialized missions in response to student demand, community need, economic opportunity or social benefit.
- In this sense, Ontario faculty believe that differentiation is a good thing for the university system. It creates a system more responsive to the needs of students, maximizes program choice, and ensures that institutions are strong partners able to help communities and the provincial government achieve their social and economic goals.
- A great deal of differentiation already exists in Ontario’s university system. From institutions that have a focus on science and technology (Waterloo) to universities with applied baccalaureate programs (Ryerson) to bilingual schools (University of Ottawa), students have a wealth of different programs and institutional specialties to choose from. This organic differentiation is the result of years of responsive and responsible academic planning by universities, their administrations, and their faculty.
- If the citizens of Ontario are interested in greater differentiation among universities, then this is a conversation worth having. However, any new policy regarding increased differentiation must be carefully constructed with appropriate input from all stakeholders in the university system.
- Also, we must be sure that we are pursuing differentiation for the right reasons. Form follows function in the university system. If differentiation is pursued with the goal of creating the best possible university system, then it will likely be driven by well-designed, beneficial policies. If, however, differentiation is pursued as a means to deliver higher education on the cheap, then it will be an unmitigated disaster.
- The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario’s recent paper, *The Benefits of Greater Differentiation of Ontario’s University Sector*, unfortunately seems to be driven by the latter impulse.
- HEQCO starts from the assumption that more differentiation is needed, without providing any real evidence why this is the case. It then proceeds to lay out a framework to achieve

their differentiation, which reads as a roadmap for the quickest and most efficient way to make universities the minions of government.

- By parceling critical operating funding into envelopes tied to certain outcomes, the paper advocates arming governments with a cudgel to ensure universities comply with the government's own policies and directives, or risk going broke. This is problematic for a few reasons.
- First, government is notoriously bad at planning the university system. For example, the Ontario government's Access to Opportunities Program, begun in the late 1990s, sought to increase the number of computer science and technology university graduates in response to explosive growth in the high tech sector. Substantial public funding was marshaled towards this goal, and indeed, the number of graduates increased. The only trouble was the dot-com bubble had already collapsed, and there were no jobs for this artificially enlarged cohort of students.
- Universities are in the best position to respond to the needs of their students and project enrolment and job market trends. When the government attempts to impose central planning on the university system, the results are disappointing at best, and wasteful at worst.
- Second, autonomy and academic freedom are cherished values of universities, and the foundation of a healthy higher education system. By telling universities what to do and how to do it, the government risks trampling this important educational independence.
- Finally, the paper advocates for greater competition amongst universities for targeted government funding. As in all competitions, there will be winners and losers. This begs the question: when does "differentiation" become "tiering"? If some institutions are less successful in competing for funds, do they become second-class institutions? And what happens to the students who must – for any number of reasons – attend these institutions? It seems wiser to ensure every institution is of comparable quality to ensure every student can benefit from a quality education.
- Competition for funding envelopes also tends to undermine the sustainability of programs in the long term. If a particular program – 'differentiated' or otherwise – cannot be sure of a certain level of funding year over year, then it will be very hard for a university to maintain it. Institutions will have no incentive to develop differentiated programs if the funding that supports these programs may disappear during the next round of multi-year agreements.
- The model of differentiation suggested by the paper also works against the accessibility of the university system. For example, Laurentian University and Lakehead University are comprehensive institutions that serve scattered and largely rural northern populations. If one were to become an undergraduate-only institution and the other sought to specialize in graduate education, then students looking for either opportunity would have to travel much further than if both institutions maintained a mix of undergraduate and graduate education. Research by Statistics Canada has shown that distance to a higher education institution can be a serious barrier to postsecondary access.
- The paper also avoids any examination of current policies working *against* greater differentiation in the university system. Our university system is chronically underfunded,

which means that they have become very adept at chasing funds. With a great deal of new federal and provincial money tied to research activities, it is little wonder that many universities are pursuing a more research-focused mission. If universities are funded at an appropriate level, then they will no longer have to hustle for dollars and can spend more time developing further in directions that reflect individual institutional missions.

- This question of funding is at the heart of the paper's failure. It *starts* from the explicit premise that differentiation is a salve for accommodating enrolment growth *within a period of fiscal restraint*. It is not about designing the best university system. It is about doing more higher education for less money. This may be a recipe for a smaller deficit or lower taxes, but it does nothing to improve the quality of the university system.
- Differentiation, in this sense, joins a host of other HEQCO and government initiatives like increased credit transfer, an online institute, and recruitment of more international students. These are all good ideas; but as soon as they become tied to the "more for less" narrative, perverse policies almost always result.
- This paper continues a disturbing trend in HEQCO's research: starting with a conclusion – usually based around a political goal, like saving the government money – and then conducting research that tends to support that conclusion. HEQCO should be conducting research aimed at producing good policies that address real issues in the university sector, not aligning itself with fiscal restraint narratives emerging from the provincial government.
- If we want to do more differentiation, let's make sure we do it right. Unfortunately, HEQCO has provided us with a very poor guide to achieving this goal.