

Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium

Response to Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Priorities and Research Agenda Discussion Paper

Introduction

The Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium was established in 1994 to address the collective needs of its member institutions. The current membership of the Consortium consists of eight Aboriginal owned and controlled education institutions located in Aboriginal communities throughout Ontario. Aboriginal institutions were created by Aboriginal communities to address the unique education and training needs identified by Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal institutions have successfully delivered a wide range of programs and services to Aboriginal learners in Ontario since 1985 and currently train or educate over 4,000 learners each year. Aboriginal institutions are successful at meeting the needs of Aboriginal students yet continue not to be formally recognized by the Province in the same manner as colleges and universities.

At the present time, Aboriginal institutions establish partnerships with mainstream colleges and universities for greater portability of student credentials. The lack of formal recognition by the Province also means that Aboriginal institutions are not resourced to the extent of mainstream institutions, thereby limiting their capacity development.

There is no source of adequate, regularized or secure funding from any source to support the growth and development of Aboriginal institutions. Both the province and the federal government provide limited support for the institutions in the form of year to year funding grants to eligible institutions. Support for Aboriginal institutions as articulated in the 2005 review of Ontario's post-secondary system conducted by Bob Rae called for increased collaboration and support for Aboriginal institutions which resulted in a significant increase over the previous allocation of \$800,000. Currently, Aboriginal institutions access \$1.8 million in provincial grants through the Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy and \$3.5 million in federal grants through the Indian Studies Support Program. Any additional funding to support Aboriginal institutions is the result of community and local fund raising efforts.

Despite the funding situation, Aboriginal institutions have repeatedly demonstrated success at providing access and at increasing the recruitment, retention and success of Aboriginal learners in post-secondary. Aboriginal institutions address needs that are not addressed by the mainstream post-secondary system, thereby complimenting the capacity development of Ontario's post-secondary system. Although there are great inequities, Aboriginal institutions comprise the third partner in the post-secondary system in Ontario along side provincially recognized colleges and universities.

The Consortium and its member institutions have a wealth of knowledge, expertise and research to provide the Council with a unique perspective with regard to addressing the specific education and training needs of Aboriginal learners. As such, the Aboriginal

Institutes' Consortium is anxious to begin a cooperative and collaborative partnership with the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to assist the Council in conducting research and providing advice to the Province for the improvement of Ontario's post-secondary system as it impacts Aboriginal learners and Aboriginal institutions.

Following are some brief comments on the priorities that have been identified by the Council.

Priorities and Implications for the Research Agenda

1. HEQCO as the leader in creating a quality assurance framework for post-secondary education

The Consortium believes there is room for improvement in mechanisms that measure the quality of Ontario's post-secondary system and supports the need for a quality assurance framework. The Consortium also supports the recognition of diversity among post-secondary institutions in addressing the needs of students and the needs of the labour market. For example, Aboriginal institutions have learned that small class sizes within community-based learning environments by faculty that understand Aboriginal learning styles, is highly successful with Aboriginal students. These are measures of quality that may get missed if the goal is to recognize one model for all.

Aboriginal institutes are constantly impacted by changes to Ontario's post-secondary system through partnerships with publicly recognized colleges and universities, through the transfer of students between colleges, universities and Aboriginal institutions. In an effort to increase recognition of credentials earned at Aboriginal institutions, the Consortium undertook research for the development of a quality assurance framework and quality assurance mechanisms, which are now being implemented. The Consortium looks forward to providing input into the development of quality assurance measures and the development of a framework for Ontario's post-secondary system.

2. HEQCO as an advisor on system planning and inter-jurisdictional competitiveness

Within ten years time, the Consortium expects the Ontario post-secondary system to pass legislation to formally recognize the contribution of Aboriginal controlled post-secondary institutions and to provide Aboriginal institutions with stable and adequate funding. It is important to recognize the achievements and contributions Aboriginal institutions make to educating and training Aboriginal learners. Recognition of Aboriginal institutions should include access to funding in a similar manner as the funding that is available to mainstream institutions, including but not limited to capital, student housing facilities, operating grants, basic skills funding and access to research grants/programs.

The Consortium is keenly interested in changes to the system that address how well the post-secondary system is addressing the social and economic needs of Aboriginal students in Ontario. Many Aboriginal students face major hurdles that are not always recognized or accommodated in the post-secondary system i.e. what efforts are made to address language barriers and language translation (First Nations languages); also, family and community are essential to the cultural fabric of some Aboriginal students, what kinds of support services are in place to assist students?

Enrolment is not always the best indicator of success. Time needs to be spent on examining the quality of service and the retention and success of students once they are enrolled. Please do not make assumptions about demographics and participation i.e. not all social classes are encouraged to attend post-secondary. We do not all share the same background and have not all had the same opportunities.

As the third element of the public post-secondary system in Ontario, the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium should be formally involved in system planning. The continually increasing Aboriginal youth population will demand programs and services which are designed to meet the needs of Aboriginal learners. The involvement of Aboriginal institutions and their expertise in educating Aboriginal learners has the Consortium well positioned to assist HEQCO in the evolution of Ontario's post-secondary system with respect to responding to the needs of Aboriginal learners.

3. HEQCO as a monitor of accessibility

Monitoring whether qualified students from all backgrounds and locations have fair access to a post-secondary education is a difficult task for any group or organization. Addressing access must include: admissions procedures; costs; attitudes of administrators; progression through to graduation; student support services; student learning styles; program and course demand and content; teaching styles; and the stresses impacting students learning.

Aboriginal people expect to be involved in monitoring access and in making decisions with respect to program and system changes for Aboriginal learners in post-secondary. Organizations that may be helpful in accomplishing these tasks are the First Nations Education Coordination Unit of the Chiefs of Ontario, the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres and the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium.

4. HEQCO as encouragement for the inter-institutional transfer

Credentials recognition and the issue of transfer credits require further study. The College-University Consortium was successful in facilitating increased partnerships however the recognition of transfer credits continues to require negotiating partnership agreements between institutions on a program by program and course by course basis. The process is very costly and time consuming for post-secondary

institutions particularly if the willingness to achieve these arrangements is not shared.

Students need a guarantee that when they obtain a credential for taking a course or program in a post-secondary institution in Ontario, the course or program is recognized throughout the province whether the credential is obtained from a college, university or Aboriginal institution. Students should not have to find out later that a course or program they have taken is not recognized in the same manner across Ontario's post-secondary system.

If the initial focus is the Ontario post-secondary system, colleges should recognize each others credentials, likewise, so should universities. Ontario may need to take a hard line that compels institutions to recognize each others credentials i.e. a provincially approved Early Childhood Education Program, delivered by an Ontario college should be recognized in the same manner throughout Ontario colleges. Those credentials should carry the same weight when applied for example, to a university degree in the field of human services in any university located in Ontario. The same principle should be applied to universities.

The issue of recognition of credentials earned at Aboriginal institutions further complicates the recognition of credentials. Aboriginal institutions were not created by an Act of the legislature and are not recognized in the same manner as provincially recognized colleges and universities. Aboriginal institutions must partner with colleges and universities to ensure portability of student credentials. In addition, negotiating these partnerships is essentially a negotiation of the costs to purchase the use of the credential from a provincially recognized college or university. Colleges and universities have entered into partnerships with Aboriginal institutions purely as an economic venture and have taken advantage of the fact that Aboriginal institutions are not provincially recognized post-secondary institutions.

Colleges and universities have open authority to examine each course and program as they see fit in determining the equivalency of the credential earned at an Aboriginal institution. For example, when an Aboriginal institution delivers a provincially approved program in Early Childhood Education, it should be recognized in the same light as ECE programs delivered by colleges and should also be recognized by all colleges in the system.

The issue of funding also needs to be addressed with respect to inter-institutional transfer. The province could make more effective use of operating and special grant funding that supports program delivery in institutions if credentials are recognized across institutions. For example, the province provides grants to a college for the delivery of a Social Service Worker Diploma program. The student then wants to enroll in a degree program at a university. As the credential is not recognized the same in all universities, the province then pays grants to the university to deliver programming to the student to "catch up" on the number of units of study the student would require to obtain the degree as the full two year diploma program is not considered two full years of study at university.

The funding issue is further magnified when you add Aboriginal institutions to the mix. For example, an Aboriginal institution receives a grant from the province for the delivery of a Social Service Worker Program. The student obtains the diploma from the Aboriginal institution and then wants to further their education at a college. There is no guarantee the credential obtained at the Aboriginal institution will be recognized at an Ontario college even though the program is provincially approved and the province provided grant funding for the delivery of the program. So, the college could in effect, obtain provincial operating grants for program delivery to "catch up" the student who received a diploma at the Aboriginal institution as the college has not allowed full recognition of the students two years of study and the diploma as equivalent to a college diploma. This situation not only leaves the Aboriginal institution in dismay, it also leads to an ineffective use of provincial funding and creates undue hardship and financial costs which students must bare.

If Aboriginal institutions were recognized by the province as a necessary and equal partner in the delivery of post-secondary programs, it would eliminate at least one level of credentials recognition and save costs. A broad base, provincially instituted system of credentials recognition not only benefits students, but also, institutions, government and employers.

5. HEQCO as a monitor of effective institutional governance and autonomy

First Nations people are involved in all aspects of life long learning and have exercised their inherent right to design and deliver education programs from early childhood through to post-secondary education. Through the creation of Aboriginal controlled institutions, First Nations people have demonstrated great success at recruiting, retaining and graduating Aboriginal learners in post-secondary and training. Therefore, the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium supports the necessity of autonomous institutional governance structures for its member institutions.

The Consortium also recommends the inclusion of First Nations representation on the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario. First Nations people have unique needs with respect to education and training and as such, must be included in decisions affecting the post-secondary system in Ontario.

Conclusion

First Nations have developed programs and created educational institutions that are successful in providing training and education programs that address human resource needs for the cultural revitalization of our Nations. Their commitment to post-secondary education is evident in the creation of Aboriginal post-secondary institutions and the creation of the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is mandated to provide advice on improving all aspects of post-secondary education. As First Nations are involved in all aspects of post-secondary education in Ontario, it is imperative that HEQCO make provision to include representation from First Nations or from the Aboriginal Institutes' Consortium on the Council of Ontario if it is truly interested in addressing the unique needs of its Aboriginal population.

As a vital partner in the post-secondary system in Ontario, the Consortium looks forward to working with the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to develop mechanisms to formally recognize the contributions of Aboriginal institutions in the delivery of quality post-secondary education and training.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Council's priorities and research agenda.