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Canadian Higher Education System: Evaluation of the HEQCO Agency for the development of Education in the province of Ontario

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Abstract

Canada is a country with a recognized Education system, and the province of Ontario has the largest number of students enrolled in Higher Education. Due to its management complexity, the Government of Ontario created the agency Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Because it is an unusual agency in most countries, this research aims to better understand HEQCO under the vision of the main stakeholders of the system. In order to reach the results, exploratory and qualitative research was developed, from the accomplishment of interviews with managers of the Canadian government and application of questionnaire for six professors specialists in Canadian Higher Education and two student leaderships. The results showed that HEQCO has a prominent role but needs greater autonomy. This study also realized that in highly centralized systems, having an agency acting on specific issues can be an efficient way to identify the greatest challenges and be more assertive in the actions and policies outlined for each locality, assisting in its development.

Keywords: Canada. Higher Education. HEQCO. Ontario. Development.

1 Introduction

The Canadian Higher Education system has significant prominence as one of the major existing educational systems. The country is one of the most developed globally, especially concerning the Human Development Index (HDI), ranked 1st in 1998. The country's educational model is supported by excellent indicators that, since the beginning of the last decade, guarantee outstanding positions for the nation, such as:

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- a) 62% of persons in the appropriate age group enrolled in Higher Education;
- b) 53% of its economically active population holds a university degree (SGUISSARDI, 2003).

However, the Canadian Higher Education system has some peculiarities that differentiate it from the traditional systems present in other countries. The largest is decentralization. In Canada, the provinces carry out the management of Higher Education. The central government acts only as a channel of aggregation between provinces, from a body called the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), but the management is purely decentralized, being the responsibility of each province (TRILOKEKAR; GLEN, 2007).

Among the ten provinces in Canada (Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan), the province of Ontario is the largest in Canada, with 39% of the country's population and 41% of full-time students enrolled in Higher Education, and it is considered the largest provincial Higher Education system in the country (CLARK *et al.*, 2009).

The challenges to maintaining a system of this complexity are many. For this reason, the Ontario Government instituted the government agency Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) in 2005 to assist in the strategic management of Higher Education in the province.

Because it is a key agency for the development of research and action to promote Higher Education in Canada's largest province, this research aims to better understand HEQCO under the vision of the main stakeholders of the system: government managers, professors specialists in Higher Education, and student leadership, in order to increase the knowledge about this agency and, with that, to broaden the discussion about the applicability of agencies like these in other countries of the world.

2 Canada Higher Education System

With singular traditions, the Canadian Education system has four centuries of evolution and French, English, and American influences (DAVIES; AURINI, 2021). Thus, Canadian universities can be included in four major groups: those who follow the tradition of the renowned University of Oxford, as King's Halifax; modeled in Edinburgh, as Dalhousie, MacGill, and Queen's, in Kingston, Ontario;

those that adopt the French system, as the Universities Laval, Montreal, and Ottawa; and those close to the US system, such as the University of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia (LOUREIRO, 1986).

The French influence was the first to prevail for constructing the Canadian university system, with the arrival of the first French teachers with explorer Samuel de Champlain¹ in 1616, when they began to teach in the small town of *Trois-Rivières*. In 1633, in Quebec City, the Jesuits founded an elementary school and a secondary school almost thirty years later. Afterward, in 1663, the seminary of Quebec was the precursor of the future institution Laval University (*Université Laval*), which is considered the oldest university of French influence throughout North America (FEDALTO, 2001).

However, the oldest on Canadian soil is the University of New Brunswick, of English origin, in 1785. The Laval University is considered the second university to be founded because it received titration only in 1852 (although in French Canada, the Higher Education system has established its roots). Later, Dalhousie University was founded in 1863, continuing the evolution of the university system in the country (FEDALTO, 2001).

Fedalto (2001) tells that universities with American influence appear in the Canadian west and Midwest due to the proximity to the United States (DAVIES; AURINI, 2021). It is there that the first public universities in the admission criteria were more liberal than the traditional criteria and conservative British model, dictated by the ecclesiastical genesis. From then emerged important universities: University of Manitoba (1877), University of British Columbia (comes in 1884, but it was established in 1912), Alberta (1906), and Saskatchewan (1907) (LOUREIRO, 1986).

The wide expansion of Canadian Higher Education occurred in a movement after the 2nd World War. The Canadian federal government had the support and financial resources for Higher Education, especially for research carried out in universities (DAVIES; AURINI, 2021). An established committee recommended transferring funds directly to universities in 1951, signaling the start of financial autonomy. Later, in 1967, a government act decreed that Canadian provinces would receive 50% of their operating costs with Higher Education from the Federal Government, representing an expansion hitherto not experienced by the population (FEDALTO, 2001).

¹ Founder of the province of Quebec, on July 3, 1608.

Finally, in the early 1970s, the system was booming due to the aforementioned government action (particularly the creation of new community colleges aimed to form labor-skilled workers specifically for the industry, the market, and the public service). In the 1980s the situation was reversed, with the Canadian Higher Education system facing a long period of budgetary constraints guided by impoverishment of the economy and high unemployment. The situation continued through the 1990s, making Higher Education Institutions (HEI) face significant budget cuts (FEDALTO, 2001; USHER, 2018). Since then, several actions and public policies have been developed to resume significant growth, which represented several challenges for Canadian Higher Education.

2.1 Evolution and policies in the Canadian Higher Education system

According to Fisher *et al.* (2006), Higher Education in Canada becomes provinces' responsibility, as the Canadian Constitution attributes. However, the lack of unity that this initiative would generate has made it seem complex for the population and legislators of the country.

As of 1967, resources are now being allocated directly to the provinces, leaving universities vulnerable to local priorities changes. Many budget cuts in the government in charge of Canada between 1984 and 1993 made provinces to seek new alternatives to finance Higher Education (CAMERON, 2004).

From the new budgetary constraints, universities had to seek alternative funding sources that resulted in a significant increase in student fees and further intensification of the university-business partnership.

Jacek (2003), Sguissardi (2003), and Wiseman (2003) explain that both actions brought concerns that did not exist in this system, such as the risk of returning to an elitist model, since not everyone would be able to afford the third degree. Spending on academic research would be driven only by market demands, making only technocratic universities.

From the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, student assistance has become a major concern for the Canadian university system, as raising tuition fees above inflation resulted in student debt growth. At the late 1990s, the reduction of federal transfers was balanced by the creation of public policies to expand this assistance (WEINGARTEN *et al.*, 2018).

Armstrong *et al.* (1992) argue that the increase in fees and the concern about getting more resources beyond the scope of the government has brought concerns to the system. For this reason, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC) has ruled that government financial transfers should not be reduced to the increase of "external" university earnings. Such positioning resulted in an academic unit regarding the actions of the Federal Government.

During this cut-up process, Jones *et al.* (2007) and Robertson (2003) argue that between 1995 and 2005, health and social transfer related funding (CHST), which is responsible for Higher Education, decreased by about 50% per student. These changes estimate that the Canadian federal government was providing only 55% of the colleges and universities' operating income, 15% lower than what was approved in the 1990s.

In 1997, a new scenario emerged in the country due to a previously unexpected surplus. Rather than restoring financial transfers to earlier levels, the government decided to invest in other instruments to support HEIs, referring to a document called the Canadian Opportunities Strategy (COS) launched in 1998. This document had policies that addressed all priority areas identified in the Renewing Student Assistance in Canada report released by the AUCC in 1997.

- a) improved financial assistance and student loans;
- b) registration tax offset credits for current students;
- c) saving aid for the families of future students;
- d) financing to give more support to research infrastructure and researchers' activities (FISHER *et al.*, 2006).

Andres and Adamuti-Trache (2008) explain that the results of these actions were satisfactory, since 54% of students received some form of government incentive between 1993 and 2003, with a 20% increase in the number of students covered. Another action of significant impact sought to equalize students' payment obligations with their payment capacities, which was based on the tax-deductibility of interest paid on student loans.

In addition to the above actions, the Canadian Federation of Students (CSF, 2013) states that the Canadian government also created the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation (CMSF) to help the country overcome its indicators in the new millennium. The objective was (i) to improve access to Higher Education for

economically disadvantaged Canadians; ii) to improve student performance rate; and (iii) to develop a national alliance of organizations and individuals around an agenda of actions for Higher Education (USHER, 2018).

This foundation operated between 1998 and 2009 and provided more than 500,000 scholarships, emphasizing serving students with financial needs and outstanding academic students (CSF, 2013).

Finally, Fedalto (2001) explains that new phenomena have influenced the Canadian Higher Education system. The first was the increase in interest in colleges that have more specific training aimed at the market's demands. The migration of many students seeking Higher Education with these characteristics has been observed.

2.2 Challenges for Canadian Higher Education

Although the Canadian educational system is recognized as one of the best worldwide, as in any other country, it is not autonomous and has points to improve. One of the first critical points is the highly decentralized Canadian federal structure. This form of government creates challenges for any political decision, for the lack of unity. This situation impacts the government's ability to influence political decisions involving all provinces, as there are often conflicts and agendas of contradictions in each region, challenging overall political direction (CAMERON, 1992; ZARIFA; DAVIES, 2018).

Trilokekar and Glen (2007) believe that the Canadian system should provide policy coordination and communicate with departments and federal agencies. The absence of a federal ministry directly responsible for Education makes the leadership a huge challenge because, like this institutional policy, each institution builds its own.

Another challenge relates to internationalization. The country must find ways to internationalize its Higher Education making its universities compete on the same level with the famous "global universities" (FRENETTE; CHOI; DORELEYERS, 2020; TRILOKEKAR; GLEN; SHUBERT, 2009).

Being a neighbor of the United States, one of the most innovative countries in the world (ITUARTE, 2020), Canada is now facing the challenge of improving its innovation indexes and patent generation. For Johnston (2010), Canada is not investing enough in research and development (1.9% of GDP) compared to the average of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, which are the respective pairs (2.2% of GDP). The need here is to combine Education and innovation.

Aiming to seek greater development by 2020, the CMEC developed a set of goals for all levels of Education called Learn Canada 2020. For Higher Education, the goals should increase the number of students seeking this level of Education, improving the quality and access. Within this perspective, the next target is defined: increase the capacity of Higher Education to meet the needs of training and learning of all Canadians in search of the third degree (CMEC, 2008).

Corroborating with the goals of Learn Canada 2020, Clark and Norrie (2013) suggest a research agenda to improve Higher Education in the country, which should be divided into three broad categories: quality, access, and changes.

1. Quality - Understanding what students learn in Higher Education programs and what they can do with the acquired knowledge.
2. Access - Increasing student access to Higher Education, especially the economically disadvantaged, identifying promising policies.
3. Changes - Identifying what needs to change to reach the desired Higher Education system for all, with a focus on quality learning, greater participation of disadvantaged groups, and more investment in research.

3 Methodology

In this research, based on the objectives, the work was developed as an explanatory research of qualitative approach. This practice is intended to structure and define theoretical models and relate hypotheses in a more unitary view of the universe, in this case, elucidate the aspects of the HEQCO agency for the development of Higher Education in Canada. As this research is delimited to study this agency, it is also considered a case study.

Direct approach collection techniques were applied from then on by conducting semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The target audience comprised key stakeholders in the system:

- a) Government managers: Government service professionals in their respective countries, responsible for effectiveness in Higher Education public policies;
- b) Experts in Higher Education: Professors and researchers who have the issue of Higher Education in some of the countries studied as one of their main fields of study;

- c) **Student Leaders:** Leaders ahead of student unions that represent the student audience of each country studied.

The criteria for the choice of interviewees and respondents were to involve leaders in management positions of the main government agencies of Ontario and the main government agency of Canada, for a global perspective. As for Higher Education experts, faculty members dedicated to studying Canadian Higher Education and allocated in renowned Universities of Ontario were involved. Finally, for student leaders, a leader of the main student organization of Ontario and a leader of Canada’s main student organization were involved for a global perspective.

The researcher’s approach to the chosen field is linked to the fact that he has already acted as a visiting researcher at a Canadian University, establishing a relationship with his peers.

Interviews are important for finding data that cannot be found in documents or bibliographies, as someone can provide this data (NOGUEIRA, 1975; TRIVIÑOS, 1987). Therefore, interviews were conducted to understand the perspectives of government managers of the respective countries regarding the hole of HEQCO.

The list of interviewees is presented in Chart 1, contemplating the participants’ agency, the denomination used in the research, the position, the city where the interview took place, and the last column that indicates whether the interview was in person or by video conference.

Chart 1 - Interviewees: government managers

Government managers				
Denomination	Agency	Position	City	Obs.
Interviewed 1	CMEC	Director and Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives for Higher Education	Calgary	Video conference
Interviewed 2	COU	Senior Director of Strategic Initiatives	Toronto	Presential
Interviewed 3	MTCU	Coordination Researcher		
Interviewed 4	HEQCO	Member of the Executive Board		
Interviewed 5	HESA*	President		

Source: Prepared by the author (2021)
*Note: Although the organization Higher Education Strategy Associates (HESA) is not effectively governmental, it is the main provider of educational consulting service for the government, for which it is classified within the group “government” in this research

Data collection questionnaires were used to analyze the perceptions of Higher Education experts and student leaders. The advantage of using this tool is to save resources for execution, as it decreases time, cost, and travels, and is not influenced by the interviewer.

The list of Higher Education experts who answered the questionnaire is shown in Chart 2, considering the name, the denomination used in the research, the university, and the faculty.

Chart 2 - Respondents: Higher Education experts

Higher Education experts			
Denomination	University	Faculty	Obs.
Respondent 1	York University	Education	Online website
Respondent 2	University of Ottawa	Social Sciences	
Respondent 3	York University	Liberal Arts and Professional Studies	
Respondent 4	University of Toronto	Education	
Respondent 5	York University	Environmental studies	
Respondent 6	York University	Environmental studies	

Source: Prepared by the author (2021)

The list of student movement leaders who responded to the questionnaires is presented in Chart 3, including the denomination used in the research, the student organization to which they belong, and the position held in that organization.

Chart 3 - Respondents: student leaders

Student leaders			
Denomination	Organization	Position	Obs.
Respondent 7	Canadian Alliance of Student Associations (CASA)	Political Analyst	Online website
Respondent 8	Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA)	Research Director	

Source: Prepared by the author (2021)

The interview scripts and questionnaires provided to all participants are related to HEQCO’s role as an important agency for the development of Ontario and, consequently, to the fact that Canada has increased the knowledge about this agency. With that, the purpose is to broaden the discussion on the applicability of such agencies in other countries worldwide.

The perspective of the main system stakeholders on the establishment of HEQCO and the belief that this agency represents a differential for managing Higher Education were understood. This investigation aimed to understand perceptions regarding the agency's main results and the prospects of creating a similar agency in other countries to manage Higher Education problems.

For the qualitative treatment, the data collected through unstructured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were treated using the content analysis technique as a reference (BARDIN, 2009) to confirm or refute the findings in the quantitative stage.

MAXQDA 10 software was used to perform the analysis, allowing meetings, organization, interviews' content analysis, focus groups, surveys, and websites, such as the dedicated web questionnaires adopted in this research.

4 Results

Unlike the other models, the Canada management of Education is decentralized; it does not have a central government that will define the way across the country. Educational management becomes a provincial responsibility, and each jurisdiction defines its policies, standards, and rules. Within this framework, this also includes Higher Education.

In the case of Higher Education, the provinces have several responsibilities, such as managing the institutions (as they are 100% public), establishing budgets, recruiting professors, and negotiating contracts. Funding of Higher Education is subsidized by provincial governments (mostly), by the Federal Government (mainly funds for research and student assistance), and by students themselves (through the collection of tuition fees, equivalent to 1/3 of the estimated cost for the undergraduate process of a student).

In order to promote communication among provinces, Canada has a council called the Council of Ministers of Education Canada (CMEC), where the ministers meet to exchange information and seek solutions to problems encountered in their jurisdictions.

As each jurisdiction has a different educational structure (and public policies, among others), specifically for provincial matters, it was decided to delimit the study to the province of Ontario, highlighting the agency HEQCO.

Since then, the following sections present the HEQCO agency in the view of the main stakeholders in the system: Government, Professors (experts in Higher Education subjects), and student leadership.

4.1 The role of the HEQCO

According to Interviewee 4, the HEQCO was established in 2005. In that year, there was a review of Higher Education legislation through Former Prime Minister Bob Rae, who was asked to conduct a thorough review and make recommendations to the government. This report is popularly known as the RAE Report (RAE, 2005).

The delivered report suggested many initiatives for the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU), and one of the actions it recommended was, among others, the need to establish an agency to research Higher Education. However, the main feature was that this agency should report to the government but not be effective within the government.

This recommendation was given because the former prime minister recognized that there was not enough capacity in the government for conducting large surveys on a daily basis. The idea was to bring an agency that would allow these actions to better see both the macro and micro environments.

The government accepted this recommendation, and when former Prime Minister Bob Rae did the review, he involved all stakeholders in the system. In this process, it was then realized that it was a need that came from the industry itself.

Since then, the HEQCO was established to develop research focused on accessibility, quality, and accountability in Higher Education demands foreseen in its legislation. In addition, the agency advise dthe government on these three areas, based on the results of its research, that need the approacch should not be academic but rather focused on the practical and political scenes.

So, in various ways engaged with the sector, it is very important for us not to think that you do just a piece of research and delivery; that is not it. This is only the beginning. Writing research is just the beginning. After that, you should really engage it with the industry, you must find a way to distribute the survey; you must find a way to talk about the research. We make several presentations in Ontario and outside, across all Canada and internationally (INTERVIEWEE 4).

Hereafter are the views of government managers, experts in Higher Education and student leaders about the perception they have of HEQCO as a body that provides new strategies and differences in Higher Education management in Ontario.

4.1.1 HEQCO in the view of Government

For government managers, the HEQCO agency plays an important role; however, it also has some challenges.

According to Interviewee 4, HEQCO has around 20 employees and a budget of around \$ 4 million per year, received directly from the government. With these resources, they can conduct research about the internal policies of the Ontario government, which should say which subjects should be studied by HEQCO.

A large annual conference is held to disseminate the research results and discuss related issues with other researchers worldwide, bringing more participants to workshops, symposiums, and small conferences. Moreover, several experts in the field seeking to work together to meet the needs raised by the government are invited. This entire process is necessary so that there is full knowledge by the government regarding the research results and actions to be taken, preventing the conducted research from being forgotten. “If you simply hand the research report to the government hands, they will ignore it. Their ability to act in research is minimal, and they have no motivation for this” (INTERVIEWEE 4).

The highest result turns out to be the effort to work on this communication gap between academic researchers and policymakers. For Interviewee 1, by doing high-quality research, the HEQCO is the only bridge between academic research and policymakers, which often have a “language” and different goals. He understands that the Ontario government sought to establish an agency that could bring evidence to policy-related discussions of Higher Education with strong research support, something that begins to also surge in other provinces: “[...] at the University of Alberta, they have policies in schools or schools of Education that seek to answer questions related to public policy and academic research and are useful to help determine the right policy for each subject” (INTERVIEWEE 1).

Corroborating with Interviewee 4, Interviewee 2 believes that the government is not particularly prepared to do independent research on particular topics; it also has different concerns in other ministries, not allowing it to change the focus of its operations. Having an agency whose primary mission is to look at general scope issues, ranging from meeting the perceived needs, becomes a very interesting idea and a differential for the sector’S improvement. “I think this perspective is

an interesting space, and I think it's important for us to have places like these to reflect and spend time, time that we do not have to think about during day-to-day. So I think it's a good initiative" (INTERVIEWEE 2).

In line with more critical thinking, Interviewee 5 shows that the former Prime Minister Bob Rae said in his report that the provincial government could not plan what people needed, especially the long-term planning, which was almost nonexistent. It was because the ministers were concerned about managing day-to-day transactions.

Interviewee 5 believes that some discrepancy exists in the description in the RAE report with the legislation that established the HEQCO, especially in terms of autonomy. The report suggested that this new body was more independent, having decision-making power. Responsibility would then be removed from the MTCU, which displeased the Minister of Education of Ontario at the time.

For Interviewee 5, the HEQCO can handle all possible issues, developing initiatives to manage financing and differentiation and effectiveness strategies, among others, but if the government does not want to listen, no action is taken. It has to respect a natural limit imposed by the ministry, which is the agency that maintains HEQCO. Thus, he believes that the government has an expensive model to get good, clear and well-researched external advice, which the agency does today; however, he should look for another alternative, citing that a model in England shows the role HEQCO should have. He says that the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is an organization that manages programs for the government and that does not rely on advice, is not attached to the government, enjoying the autonomy "come" and "go," and is considered almost a governmental body.

The expectation in England was that it was created as an intermediate body, but this was not the path taken by the Ontario government. In any way, Interviewee 5 reinforces that HEQCO has produced relevant topics for discussion, that its presence is important in the province, and that expects it to have more autonomy. This interviewee also acknowledges the agency is a group composed of very intelligent people but recognizes that does not influence the system too much.

He believes it is important to have an agency to think outside the box since the government does not have time for several other duties. He finds it difficult to align research with day-to-day tasks. On the other hand, in MTCU's view, represented by Interviewee 3, the link with the ministry is essential.

We understand that HEQCO has conducted significant research to help us. Since the MTCU does not do pure research, it hires organizations to do them. Normally we (MTCU) built the strategy and passed on to HEQCO, which conducts research focusing on the Ministry's needs (INTERVIEWEE 3).

Finally, considering other countries' context, Interviewee 2 believes it is normal to ask big questions that are day-to-day lost, even if there is interest in answering them due to lack of time, staff, and resources. For this reason, it is recommended to have a body that has the primary mission to answer these questions. "[...] it has been a good initiative here, and I believe that if you don't have something like this and if you are seeking development, then it makes sense to have someone or some institution or some organization answering the system's big questions" (INTERVIEWEE 2).

4.1.2 HEQCO in the view of the Professors (experts in Canadian Higher Education)

In general, unlike the government managers who mostly advocate for the importance and role of HEQCO, experts in Higher Education have a more cautious position when referring to this agency. However, they understand the reasons that led to its creation.

In order to strengthen the contributions of Interviewee 4, Respondent 1 describes that such a council was recommended in the RAE Report, which proposed that the government created a body that would determine quantifiable measures for planning and evaluating Higher Education. The HEQCO then started researching specific policies, presumably those on which the government needed further information. Respondent 2 complements when quoting the agency's relationship with the government, saying it is an advisory body to research and evaluate the results that form the basis of recommendations to the MTCU in the province of Ontario. Furthermore, Respondent 6 strengthens that the main areas to focus on are Quality, Access, and Accountability within the system.

In addition, Respondent 3 classifies the creation of HEQCO and its role as a government attempt to improve transparency to the citizens and try guiding the directions through a body funded by it, but, in theory, acting independently.

According to Respondent 4, the purpose of its creation was to compensate for the lack of another agency. He believes that the establishment of HEQCO came to fill the gap left by the former intermediate body, the Ontario Council on University

Affairs when it was abolished. For this reason, it was necessary to establish a high level of advice that could help the government on policies for Higher Education.

However, questions about the lack of independence of this agency were also highlighted by the respondents.

Contrary to the presentation of Respondent 4, for Respondent 1, HEQCO could not compensate for the absence of the Ontario Council on University Affairs:

The role of HEQCO is ambiguous. Mostly, it commissions research and serves as an occasional policy adviser. This role is very different and much more limited than the old Ontario Council on University Affairs or its predecessor, the Committee on University Affairs, which had awarded consultancy roles policy (RESPONDENT 1).

Respondent 5 also shows concern for the autonomy of HEQCO to perform and mainly apply the research.

This agency has done some interesting things, but it has limitations. There is no requirement for the MTCU to accept the recommendations of this group. For this reason, it will always worry that if political will and/or policy priorities are not aligned with the research/evaluation results, then the policy recommendations will not move forward (RESPONDENT 5).

Respondent 2 also questions the real purpose of establishing this agency but believes that its creation had good intentions: “I think the intentions were vague and generic, but well-intentioned and appropriate: address quality issues in Higher Education in Ontario” (RESPONDENT 2).

Respondent 2 also strengthens that, over the years, HEQCO is gaining maturity and goes on to become one of the most important agencies on applied research concerning Higher Education, not only in Ontario but all across Canada, at the same time that acts as a continuous source of ideas for policy innovation.

Finally, Respondent 1 goes beyond the perception of Respondent 2, saying that currently, this advice has served more than just a political function - also evaluating early versions of Strategic Mandate Agreements. This agreement, by which universities of Ontario had to submit to the Ministry their strategies and

goals for the coming years is effective from 2013. However, contrary to what was expected, HEQCO refused to classify the universities, making the government reassume direct control of this agenda, which resulted in firmly positioning the agency in an adverse situation.

4.1.3 HEQCO in the view of Canadian Student Leadership

As experts in Higher Education, the surveyed student leaders recognize the importance of HEQCO but do not hide an expectation for a most effective performance of this agency.

Respondent 8 believes that the main objective of HEQCO is to provide a state of permanent evaluation of Higher Education in Ontario to follow all students' needs and take proactive measures. Moreover, the student points out the importance of this agency to research the best practices in Higher Education to assist in advancing Higher Education in Ontario and influencing the educational system from other provinces. An important point emphasized by the student leader is the need for HEQCO to also make comparisons with other jurisdictions within Canada since Higher Education is a provincial responsibility. Actions such as these would be one way to search for a guided unit in excellence.

For Respondent 7, beyond developing relevant research for Ontario and across Canada, the agency must also provide feedback on quality metrics for the Higher Education system to draw a map of what should be followed to improve results in the sector.

However, according to how they referred to financing, both student leaders possess a more critical stance. Respondent 7 believes that it is necessary to allocate more resources for the agency, around \$ 4 million per year, to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of research. "Until now, the amount of funding received demonstrated by HEQCO's website does not seem significant [...]" (RESPONDENT 7).

Aware of the important role of an organization such as HEQCO, Respondent 8 shows an expectation about the results that the agency should seek, especially in new alternatives for Higher Education financing, reinforcing the importance of this variable for the system. "They could, however, make more ways that help to provide Ontario moving increasingly. As important as this would be providing concrete suggestions on alternative forms of financing of Higher Education" (RESPONDENT 8).

Finally, although there are challenges to be overcome and greater expectations about the results that could be achieved, both student leaders recognize that HEQCO has done a good job in evaluating courses and has explored alternative strategies and practices of other systems of Higher Education.

5 Final thoughts

Canada is a country that stands out worldwide regarding Higher Education. It is one of the well-funded systems globally, with one of the highest rates of participation. Its universities have high rankings in major world rankings and are considered a high-quality system. In the country's context, the province of Ontario stands out, responsible for receiving 39% of the national population. The internationally recognized performance of this province is due to several factors, including a frequently cited organization, HEQCO.

The true role of this agency and its importance to the Canadian participants were checked to understand how establishing an organization with these precepts would be advantageous to other countries. At the end of the analysis, it can be seen that it is important for a Higher Education system to have an independent organization so that it can carry out research that does not suffer direct intervention from the government and consequently is unaware of the influences of political parties.

After analyzing the specific results of HEQCO and gathering insights from government managers, professors, experts in Higher Education, and student leaders, it is possible to identify the following limitations:

- a) lack of autonomy to decide which research to perform. Unlike what has been provided in the legislation that established this council, instead of performing independent research, all the researched subjects and themes need to come from the MTCU;
- b) lack of power for decision making: regardless of the outcome that is appointed in a study, it will go ahead only if the MTCU consider that subject relevant;
- c) it does not influence the system: due to lack of autonomy, the studies conducted by the council (many of which are considered relevant by the surveyed participants) had not the expected practical impact;
- d) there is no requirement for the government to follow the recommendations: there is no formal commitment from the MTCU to follow the recommendations

by the results presented by HEQCO; many actions that could have a positive impact on the system are refused.

In any case, positive aspects can also be identified, particularly associated with actions that have been taken by MTCU and have brought good results to the Higher Education system in Ontario:

- a) place for thoughts: HEQCO has become a forum for debate in the provincial Education system;
- b) HEQCO is an agency that essentially deals with issues that arise in the day-to-day, to which the government cannot devote the necessary time;
- c) the agency advises the greatest challenges of the ministry;
- d) the agency provides transparency to society through the results of its research.

After conducting this research and recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of this agency, it is suggested to expand the debate about adopting an agency with these characteristics in other countries from an analysis based on different studies. Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that an agency such as HEQCO needs autonomy, and the creation of such an agency should happen as long as it is granted to it the appropriate autonomy to bring the expected results, considering that this was the main weak point identified in this research.

According to Costa e Barbosa (2018) and, Costa and Zha (2020), one of the policies that allowed the expansion of Chinese Higher Education was its decentralization to central and rural institutions. The provinces have some autonomy, but need to respond to requests from the Chinese government. The presence of an agency such as HEQCO in different provinces could assist the Chinese government in thinking about local strategies, thus improving control and performance. In this context, several countries could benefit from an agency such as HEQCO.

The same is true for Brazil, where educational institutions need to respond to the Ministry of Education regulations in the Federal Government, which develops the main public policies (COSTA *et al.*, 2020). Agencies such as HEQCO could expand the lens to local issues, which would be an additional subsidy to meet the goals of the National Education Plan 2014-2024 (ECHALAR; LIMA; OLIVEIRA, 2020).

In the case of Cuba, which has gone through a process of massification in search of universalization (SERPA; FALCÓN, 2019), an agency that helps to understand the main questions of the system could be also of additional support to the government, which often fails to dedicate itself to think about more specific issues due to the other sectors that need attention.

Additionally, the studies by Schmal and Cabrales (2018) corroborate the need for an agency such as HEQCO to define a strategic alignment between HEI in Chile, which have a broad and unaddressed approach. An agency capable of understanding the local issues of the system could give the Chilean provinces the right direction.

Finally, in highly centralized Education systems, having an agency acting on specific issues can efficiently identify the greatest challenges and make it possible to be more assertive in the actions and policies outlined for each locality.

Sistema de Educação Superior canadense: avaliação da Agência HEQCO para o desenvolvimento da Educação na província de Ontário

Resumo

O Canadá é um país com um sistema educacional reconhecido, e a província de Ontário tem o maior número de estudantes matriculados na Educação Superior. Devido à sua complexidade de gestão, o governo de Ontário criou a agência “Conselho de Qualidade da Educação Superior de Ontário” (HEQCO). Por ser uma agência incomum na maioria dos países, essa pesquisa visa a entender melhor a HEQCO, sob a visão dos principais stakeholders do sistema. Para alcançar os resultados, foi desenvolvida uma pesquisa exploratória e qualitativa, a partir da realização de entrevistas com gerentes do governo canadense e aplicação de um questionário para seis professores especialistas em Ensino Superior canadense e duas lideranças estudantis. Os resultados mostraram que a HEQCO tem um papel de destaque, mas precisa de maior autonomia. A partir desse estudo, também foi constatado que, em sistemas altamente centralizados, ter uma agência atuando em questões específicas pode ser uma maneira eficiente de identificar os maiores desafios e ser mais assertivo nas ações e políticas descritas para cada localidade, auxiliando em seu desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: *Canada. Educação Superior. HEQCO. Ontario. Desenvolvimento.*

Sistema canadiense de Educación Superior: evaluación de la Agencia HEQCO para el desarrollo de la Educación en la provincia de Ontario

Resumen

Canadá es un país con un sistema educativo reconocido, y la provincia de Ontario tiene la mayor cantidad de estudiantes matriculados en educación superior. Debido a su complejidad de gestión, el Gobierno de Ontario creó la agencia Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Debido a que es una agencia inusual en la mayoría de los países, esta investigación tiene como objetivo comprender mejor a HEQCO bajo la visión de los principales actores del sistema. Para llegar a los resultados se desarrolló una investigación exploratoria y cualitativa, a partir de la realización de entrevistas a directivos del gobierno canadiense y la aplicación de un cuestionario a seis profesores especialistas en educación superior canadiense y dos líderes estudiantiles. Los resultados mostraron que HEQCO tiene un papel destacado pero necesita una mayor autonomía. Este estudio también percibió que en sistemas altamente centralizados, tener una agencia que actúe en temas específicos puede ser una forma eficiente de identificar los mayores desafíos y ser más asertivos en las acciones y políticas definidas para cada localidad, ayudando a su desarrollo.

Palabras clave: *Canadá. Educación Superior. HEQCO. Ontario. Desarrollo.*

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