HEQCO's Report on the Strategic Mandate Agreement Submissions: A Summary and An Assessment of Its Implications for Queen's

In the fall of 2012, the provincial government required every university and college in Ontario to prepare and submit a proposed mandate statement. Each institution's statement was intended to form the basis for a bilateral discussion between the government and the university or college, the outcome of which discussion was to be a Strategic Mandate Agreement between the institution and the government. At the time of writing (April 2013), these discussions have not yet taken place.

In the meantime, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) convened an expert panel to assess the submissions from Ontario's colleges and universities. HEQCO released Quality: Shifting the Focus, the panel's report, on April 4, 2013, and this short briefing note summarizes what the panel said in its report, and offers some views on what the report means for Queen's at a time when we have also been developing a Strategic Framework, supported by previously approved and emerging plans, to guide us over the next several years.

A considerable amount of what the panel had to say was directed at what the government should do, but there are four areas that allow for consideration of the implications for Queen's. These are: balancing growth and quality, a focus on learning outcomes and teaching and learning quality, increased differentiation and collaboration, and on-line and blended learning. In what follows, each of these is examined from the perspective of Queen's.

A. Balancing growth and quality

For many years, provincial governments of all political persuasions have talked about the quality of post-secondary education in Ontario, but have done little through funding to promote it. The report argues for incentives through funding envelopes for explicit outcomes with measureable effects on quality, instead of simply promoting growth by linking funding to enrolment increases. The report does not dismiss the need for further growth, but argues that funding for growth "must be linked" to quality as well.

Funding envelopes are not in fact the only instrument that the government could use to focus more on quality and less on growth. Another is a full-scale rethinking of the formula, including BIU weights, although we detect little appetite for the latter either in the Ministry or around the COU table. With respect to the introduction of a funding envelope that addresses quality, we have little doubt that Queen's would be very competitive in such an environment. Queen's has grown less quickly than the system over the years, so that our system share has fallen (not a bad thing at a time when Ministry officials are moving away from using maintenance or increase of this as a marker and even discouraging its use in discourse around funding). Quality, though challenged in various ways in our in-classroom experience, remains high, whether it is measured by the strength of our applications from outstanding students, student engagement, our retention rate, our graduation

 $^{^{\}mathbf{1}} \ Our \ submission \ is \ available \ at \ http://queensu.ca/provost/responsibilities/responsetomtcu/proposed mandate statment.pdf; \ links \ to \ all \ submissions$ are available at http://www.heqco.ca/en-CA/About%20Us/policyadvice/Pages/smas.aspx

The full report is available at http://www.heqco.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/FINAL%20SMA%20Report.pdf

rate, and our employment rate. All these measures position us well for funding related to quality. Our proposed mandate statement makes this point, and stresses the value of continued conservative growth in terms of making our high-quality learning experience available to more students.

B. A focus on learning outcomes and teaching and learning quality

The report has little to say on this topic. It does commend the commitment of many institutions to experiential and entrepreneurial education, which is noteworthy because our commitment in this respect was a sufficiently important part of our submission to warrant its being one of our three priority objectives. The report also argues for "a deeper...commitment to measurement of learning outcomes, even beyond what is happening now", in which context it is pertinent to mention that Queen's is one of three Ontario universities (Guelph and Toronto are the other two) to be awarded funding by HEQCO to do precisely this. Our project aims to measure the development of the fundamental academic skills espoused in our Academic Plan during an undergraduate student's time at Queen's.

C. Increased differentiation and collaboration

The report observes that "almost all the universities intend to sustain and expand research and graduate studies", which, it is argued, will result in "greater homogenization" rather than more differentiation of the system. Queen's has nothing to fear if the government takes the report's advice and resists the trend to homogeneity, as is clear from page 20 of the report. We are sixth in Ontario in terms of doctoral degrees awarded, fifth for master's degrees, sixth for tri-council funding, and third for tri-council funding per full-time faculty member. Furthermore, our proposed mandate statement committed to maintaining the number of students in research-based graduate degrees and growing professional master's programs, as part of another of our priority objectives, namely expanding graduate credentials. That said, it will be important to maintain vigorous advocacy and communication in support of Queen's membership in the research-intensive group of Ontario universities in any government-imposed differentiation or tiering. Strategic alliances are as important provincially as they are nationally or internationally, and within the Ontario members of the U15, Queen's is exploring an explicit partnership with one similar institution.

Additionally, our priority objective of expanding undergraduate credentials demonstrates our commitment to the increased collaboration among institutions that the report believes is a necessary corollary to greater differentiation. In particular, we continue to seek more opportunities to develop our partnership with St Lawrence College.

D. On-line and blended learning

The panel was asked to give some consideration to how it would recommend using a \$30 million Transformation Fund. It responded by encouraging the government to support "the development

of on-line or blended learning materials, especially of common introductory courses". This is where our attention has been focused in recent years.

Conclusion

There is a high degree of convergence between directions that the government has signaled directly or that have been signaled for it by the HEQCO report, on the one hand, and the priorities that we have developed in the Strategic Framework. This is not coincidence; it is based on careful listening at the political and bureaucratic level, and a sustained advocacy program over the past three years that has stressed the need for a "balanced academy" such as Queen's in any differentiated Ontario system. While it would be unwise to predict that we have anticipated every possible future move by this or a subsequent government, we are in a good position because our goals cohere with government wishes and with the advice that government has been receiving from external agencies such as HEQCO.