

**News Release - September 27, 2016**

## **A Canadian first: Assessing core skills in postsecondary students**

**Toronto, Sept. 27, 2016** – Amid concern that today's postsecondary graduates are lacking critical employability skills, an international test on literacy, numeracy and problem-solving will be given to first-year and graduating students at 11 colleges in Ontario. A similar pilot for universities will follow in fall 2017.

The Essential Adult Skills Initiative (EASI) pilot project by the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) marks the first time in Canada that core skills, considered foundational to success in work and life, will be evaluated at the postsecondary program and institutional level.

"We're very adept at teaching disciplinary content and assessing whether it has been learned," says Harvey Weingarten, HEQCO president and CEO. "But when it comes to core skills like communication, critical thinking and problem solving, we have little information about whether students arrive on campus with these skills or to what degree they acquired them through their studies, because we don't test for them. Students are missing an opportunity to understand and describe the skill sets they bring to the workplace, while our colleges and universities are missing an opportunity to assess the effectiveness of their programs, identify weaknesses and address them."

Ontario colleges volunteering for the pilot are Algonquin, Centennial, Conestoga, Fanshawe, Fleming, George Brown, Humber, Sault, Seneca, Sheridan and St. Lawrence. Five Ontario universities have signed on to-date for the second phase of the pilot: McMaster, Queen's, Ryerson, Wilfrid Laurier and York universities, as well as Quest University in British Columbia.

"Each of these institutions is demonstrating a genuine interest in assessing the knowledge and skills of their entering and graduating students," says Weingarten. "Each understands the importance of these core skills as critical to their graduates in the workplace and in navigating the world."

Using the internationally recognized Education & Skills Online assessment from the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the first phase of the EASI pilot will test 350 first-year students at each of the participating colleges in October 2016; the second phase will test a similar number of graduating students from the institutions in February 2017. The students are drawn from specific programs at each institution, ranging from sciences and business to humanities and applied arts. The college final report, to be available by fall 2017, will evaluate the practicality and validity of the test and provide an initial sense of whether students have enhanced core skills in literacy, numeracy and technology-enabled problem-solving over the course of their postsecondary studies.

The 90-minute online test consists of a series of questions or tasks based on everyday scenarios, examining how the student comprehends and applies numeric and textual information. Students receive individualized reports on their skills proficiency and can compare their scores with OECD international data. Participating colleges and universities will have an evidence-based window on the entering and exiting skills of their students. The results for each college and university will be revealed only to the institution and will not be included in the study reports.

"The initial goal is that colleges and universities use these results as instruments for quality enhancement," says Weingarten. "If the pilots prove successful, this could become standard practice in Ontario and beyond. One measure doesn't give the full picture on skills acquisition and this is just one way to capture the value-added of higher education, but it's a revolutionary first step for Canadian higher education."

### **About the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario**

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is an agency of the Government of Ontario, established in 2005 to

contribute to the improvement of Ontario's postsecondary education system. HEQCO is mandated to conduct research, evaluate the postsecondary education system and provide policy recommendations to the Minister of Advanced Education and Skills Development on improving system quality, access and accountability.

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