

# The Quality Assurance System for Ontario Postsecondary Education: 2010 ~ 2014

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## Abstract

The period of 2010 to 2014 marked a relatively stable stage in the evolving quality assurance system for Ontario postsecondary education, particularly following massive changes after 2000. The current system consists of three frameworks overseen respectively by three quality assurance agencies -- the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, and the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, each serving different purposes. This paper uses van Vught and Westerheijden's (1994) general model of quality assessment and Jeliaskova and Westerheijden's (2002) Phase Model of quality assurance systems development as heuristic tools for the analysis. The following four areas are discussed: formalized quality mechanisms with diversity; the arms-length tripartite relationship with a distinction between self-regulation and government regulation; mixed phases of quality assurance development and the maturing process; and gaps in the system. It is argued that within fifteen years, a comprehensive and relatively mature quality assurance system with diverse but rigorous mechanisms has been developed for Ontario postsecondary education although a few deficiencies exist, including the continued lack of coordination within the system. The evolution of the system appears to reflect a path trajectory of governance structure development of the Ontario postsecondary education system as well as be a result of interactions between the local and the global.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance; Ontario Postsecondary Education; Self-Regulation; Accountability; Improvement

## 1. Introduction

The shifting landscape of postsecondary education in the past few decades has heightened the attention to quality-related issues. Factors that have lent prominence to quality assurance issues include the expansion and diversification of postsecondary education, internationalization, cuts in public funding, privatization of higher education, new approaches to public administration, and international competition (Brennan & Shah, 2000; El-Khawas, 2007; El-Khawas, DePietro-Jurand, & Holm-Nielsen, 1998). Quality in postsecondary education has become a central concern and there is a global trend toward the establishment of rigorous quality assurance systems in countries across the world.

Under the Canadian constitution, education is under the jurisdiction of the government of each of the ten provinces and three territories. Each of them has its own postsecondary education system as well as quality assurance frameworks and mechanisms. This highly decentralized governance structure has made Canada quite a distinctive case in terms of quality assurance (Weinrib & Jones, 2014). There is lack of consistency in the definitions<sup>[1]</sup> of the term quality assurance and in the approaches to quality assurance.

Traditionally, major quality assurance mechanisms used in Canada include legislation; affiliation and federation with public universities; external and internal reviews; provincial/territorial registration/licensing; and professional accreditation (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials [CICIC], 2009). The uncoordinated quality assurance mechanisms have been labeled “patchwork” (Oldford, 2006). It is widely acknowledged as a complex challenge to use a unified mechanism across the postsecondary sector for quality assurance and to assess quality assurance mechanisms for different types of institutions and those mechanisms in various jurisdictions (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009; Klassen, 2012; Oldford, 2006). To address this gap, a couple of pan-Canadian initiatives have taken place in the past decade, including the release of the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework (Council of Ministers of Education, Canada [CMEC], 2007) and the creation of the pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Framework (CICIC, 2012). However, these coordinating documents

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<sup>[1]</sup>Here are two definitions used by two pan-Canadian organizations: “Quality assurance refers to the achievement of educational program standards established by institutions, professional organizations, government, and/or standard-setting bodies established by government” (CICIC, 2009); “Quality assurance refers to the criteria and processes that are employed in reviews of institutions and/or programs to determine whether standards set for postsecondary curriculum, outcomes, and input are being met and maintained, and whether they encourage continuous improvement in the quality of higher education” (CMEC, n.d.).

do not change the scenario where each province and territory has its own independent and self-sustained system of quality assurance for postsecondary education.

This paper focuses on the quality assurance system for postsecondary education in Ontario, the most populous province in Canada and also the one with the largest postsecondary education system. In the following sections, I will first provide an overview of the evolution and the key components of the three frameworks of the Ontario quality assurance system and then evaluate the features of the system in light of two conceptual models of quality assurance (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) on the basis of several data sources. I will also provide some interpretations as to why a system with those features has come into being, and argue that the emergence of the Ontario quality assurance system was influenced by certain local and global factors.

The history of external quality appraisal for Ontario postsecondary education began in the 1960s. Since then, different, uncoordinated quality-related mechanisms were put in place for academic programs at Ontario universities and colleges. The past fifteen years have been particularly eventful. Three quality assurance agencies that are external to postsecondary institutions have emerged: the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (also known as the Quality Council) as mandated by the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Ontario public universities and their programs; the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) to assure the quality of programs offered by public colleges; and the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) for assessment of degree-granting programs offered outside Ontario public universities. By 2010, an external quality assurance system driven by the work of the three agencies had come into being. The system remained stable till the end of 2014. In 2015, the dynamics within the system have been shifting again as the OCQAS framework starts to implement a new College Quality Assurance Accreditation Process, which instills another major change within the whole quality assurance system in Ontario.

Given this context, it is meaningful to examine the quality assurance practices during the stable period of 2010 to 2014 and analyze the features therein. This endeavour will not only help the stakeholders in Ontario to develop a better understanding of the status of quality assurance for postsecondary education within the province but also demonstrate to readers from other parts

of the world how a well-balanced quality assurance system has evolved in a democratic society such as Canada. The analysis will hopefully stimulate more ideas on how to enhance quality assurance mechanisms in other jurisdictions.

## 2. Methodology

The description and evaluation of the quality assurance system for Ontario postsecondary education in this paper are informed by the following data sources relating to its three components -- the QAF framework, the OCQAS framework, and the PEQAB framework.

- (1) Publicly available documents published on the websites of the three quality assurance agencies;
- (2) Interview data I collected from a total of 14 key informants who are currently, or were previously, involved with the development or implementation of the quality assurance processes under the three frameworks; and
- (3) Archives provided by two of the interviewees regarding how QAF and OCQAS frameworks were first developed.

The arguments in this paper have also drawn upon my observations of the case studies I conducted at seven Ontario postsecondary institutions regarding their practices in implementing those frameworks (Liu, 2015) and at three universities regarding change management during the transitional period of implementing the QAF (Liu & Liu, 2015). Data triangulation (Patton, 2002) was applied to verify information from different sources.

In addition, the analysis and evaluation in this paper is also made in light of van Vught and Westerheijden's (1994) general model of quality assessment for postsecondary education and Jeliaskova and Westerheijden's (2002) Phase Model of quality assurance systems development. Both recognize the distinction between the intrinsic and extrinsic qualities of postsecondary education -- the inherent values of the pursuit of knowledge and the search for truth, and the necessity to respond to the changing demands from society. The general model posits that a well-established quality assurance mechanism is characterized by a system-level agency operating independently from the government; academics' ownership and self-evaluation of the process; peer reviews with site visits; reporting for improvement purposes rather than for judgment; and no direct, rigid connections between quality review results and funding decisions.

The Phase Model represents the contingencies in the evolution of

quality assurance systems. It defines four types of quality assurance problems, which range from “serious doubts about educational standards” (Phase 1) to “need to stimulate sustainable quality assurance in institutions” (Phase 4) (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002, p. 435), with an increasing trust of the public in postsecondary institutions. To address those problems, the role of quality assurance at Phase 1 is to identify sub-standard educational programs whereas at Phase 4, it splits between improvement based on self-regulation and public accountability. The nature of the external review is summative through accreditation at Phase 1 and split between an audit report to the institution and verification of the data to be incorporated in public databases. The model demonstrates the evolving relations between postsecondary education and the government from a “one-to-one control mechanism” at the lower phase of quality assurance development to “more complex and presumably more effective forms of accountability, where concepts as academic excellence and autonomy take on a new meaning” at an advanced phase (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002, p. 437). As a quality assurance system moves toward a higher phase, its focus shifts from the external dynamics to the internal dynamics.

### **3. An Overview of the Ontario Quality Assurance System**

Currently, Ontario’s postsecondary education system consists of 21 publicly assisted universities, 24 publicly assisted colleges (including two French-speaking ones), 17 private universities (almost all have a religious affiliation), and over 250 registered private career colleges. The public university and college sectors have different roles and distinct governance structures running parallel to each other and constituting the mainstream of the system (Jones, 1997). This historically formulated binary structure makes it reasonable to establish separate quality assurance mechanisms for the two sectors.

#### **3.1 The QAF Framework for the University Sector**

The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) represents the quality assurance policy for the Ontario university sector. It is important to note that the QAF is not a government-created document; rather, it was the output of a two-year development process (2008 ~ 2009) under the leadership of a special task force, which worked closely with the academic vice-presidents of Ontario universities and consulted with the Ontario government responsible for postsecondary education (i.e., the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities,

or OMTCU). The QAF was unanimously approved by the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) in February 2010. In the same year, a quality council was established by the OCAV to replace its predecessor -- the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS). Previously, quality assurance for public Ontario universities was administered under a binary arrangement: appraisals of graduate programs were conducted by OCGS whereas undergraduate programs were subject to audits by the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee<sup>[2]</sup> (UPRAC) under the direction of OCAV. A significant change as a result of the QAF is the unification of the previously separate mechanisms under the OCGS and the UPRAC.

The implementation of QAF is overseen by a quality agency under the Council of Ontario Universities, known as the Quality Council. The Quality Council undertakes two major responsibilities: approving new undergraduate and graduate programs, as well as auditing each university's internal quality assurance process, known as the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP), on an eight-year cycle. Those two functions are implemented by an appraisal committee and an audit committee. Although it makes periodic reports to the government, the Quality Council is responsible to the OCAV and the Council of Ontario Universities, which are essentially the universities themselves, without being monitored by the government in any way.

It is fully acknowledged in the QAF that Ontario public universities have the primary responsibility for academic standards, quality assurance, and program improvement, and maintain their autonomy for priority setting and decision making. Abiding by the QAF, all 24 universities are committed to developing their own IQAPs that are consistent not only with their own institutional missions and visions but also with the four protocols under the QAF -- new program approvals, expedited approvals of program modifications, cyclical program reviews, and an audit process. Accountability is ensured in that the IQAP of each university has to be ratified by the Quality Council before its implementation. All universities are also held accountable to a set of province-wide Degree Level Expectations (DLEs)<sup>[3]</sup>, the degree profiles for graduates from Ontario universities. The QAF aims to strike a balance between the needs for accountability and continuous program improvements as it emphasizes “quality *assurance* that produces quality

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<sup>[2]</sup>The UPRAC reviewed policies, procedures, and practices, rather than assessed individual programs.

<sup>[3]</sup>There are two separate DLEs: one for undergraduate programs and the other for graduate programs. The DLEs are represented by a matrix that describes six categories of broadly defined learning outcomes for graduates of bachelor's degrees, master's degrees, and doctoral degrees.

*enhancement*” (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance [OUCQA], 2014, p. 1).

The QAF document presents itself in an illustrative and well-articulated way, with flow charts used to demonstrate the whole processes of new program development and cyclical program reviews. A cyclical review typically starts with a self-study and is then followed by external peer reviews before proceeding to the stages of institutional evaluation and formulation of implementation plans. The executive summary and the associated implementation plan are required to be posted on the institution’s website and a copy provided to the Quality Council. In the case of institutional auditing, the audited university is provided with an opportunity to comment on the audit report before the report is finalized; the summary of the report is publicly available on the website of the Quality Council.<sup>[4]</sup> The conclusions of the audit report fall into two categories: suggestions (desirable areas universities can address voluntarily) and recommendations (areas that universities must address). Thus, the results are not punitive.

### 3.2 The OCQAS Framework for the College Sector

The Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) for the college sector has two functional components: (1) The Credential Validation Service (CVS), which provides program-level quality assurance through validation of programs of instruction; and (2) the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA), which is an institutional-level mechanism involving a 5-year cyclical audit of each college’s program quality assurance processes. The new institutional accreditation process that started in fall 2015 is built upon the existing CVS and PQAPA functions.

The CVS and PQAPA processes did not begin their operations at the same time. The CVS is mandated by a government policy -- the Minister’s Binding Policy Directive, the Framework for Programs of Instruction of 2003, of which the legal authority is enshrined in the legislation, the Ontario Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act 2002. The policy directive established two requirements of the college sector: (1) a system-wide credential validation service executed on the basis of the Credentials Framework,<sup>[5]</sup> which represents the minimum provincial standards for an array of college credentials ranging from certificates

<sup>[4]</sup>The summary audit reports can be found on the website of OUCQA (2015).

<sup>[5]</sup>The Credentials Framework includes these components: scope of curriculum outcomes; breadth and depth (including complexity of knowledge and vocational outcomes, essential employability skills, and general education); typical duration for completion; admission requirements; and name of credential.

to graduate certificates; and (2) institutional commitment to establishing mechanisms for program reviews to “ensure ongoing quality, relevancy, and currency” (Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [OMTCU], 2003, p. 5). In response to the first requirement, the CVS began its operation in February 2005. The establishment of the audit model (PQAPA) was the response of Ontario colleges to the second requirement but was more of an initiative of colleges themselves. The model was developed through a joint government-college working group between 2003 and 2005 and was tested out in a pilot project at five colleges in 2006 before it was approved by the Committee of Presidents of Ontario colleges for full implementation in January 2007. Thereby, quality assurance mechanisms for the college sector extended from program-level credential validation to institutional-level auditing.

It is important to note that the CVS does not approve programs but validates them against the Credentials Framework. This happens in the context where the responsibility for the approval of programs has been moved from the government to the local Board of Governors at each college (Klassen, 2012). Thus, there is no need to have an external agency to approve, or to involve elaborate procedures. As of 2012, the CVS had processed an average of 200 proposals per year, approximately 80% of which were for new programs and 20% for existing programs that needed to change titles or credentials (Klassen, 2012).

The PQAPA process is more elaborate than that of the CVS. Its intention is “designed to be a developmental activity” and seeks to “contribute to the continuous improvement of the educational programs of the college system” (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service [OCQAS], 2014, p. 20). The quality audits operate on a 5-year cycle. Each audit starts with a self-study within the college and a subsequent site visit by an audit panel. Six criteria<sup>[6]</sup> drawn from

<sup>[6]</sup>These six criteria (OCQAS, 2014, pp. 8-9) are:

- Criterion 1. Program-level learning outcomes for all programs of instruction are set, are consistent with the college mission and the programs’ intended purpose, and are appropriate for the credential offered upon successful completion of the program;
- Criterion 2. Admission, credit for prior learning, promotion, graduation, and other related academic policies support program development and student achievement of program learning outcomes;
- Criterion 3. Programs conform to the Framework for Programs of Instruction and the Credentials Framework, are consistent with accepted college system nomenclature / program titling principles, and maintain relevance;
- Criterion 4. Methods of program delivery and student evaluation are consistent with the program learning outcomes;
- Criterion 5. Human, physical, financial, and support resources to support student achievement of program learning outcomes are available and accessible;
- Criterion 6. Regular program quality assessment that involves faculty, students, industry representatives, and others as appropriate for the purpose of continual improvement is in place and happens.



global exemplary practices are used as the standards for both the self-study and the audit. The findings of the audit panel are grouped into three categories: commendations (areas of exemplary practices), affirmation (areas identified by the college itself as weaknesses), and recommendations (areas identified by the audit panel for improvement). The audit report includes the judgments of “met,” “partially met,” or “not met” against the six individual quality criteria, as well as the maturity level<sup>[7]</sup> of the college’s quality assurance processes. The draft report is forwarded to the audited college for response within 30 days, and the responses are then incorporated into the final report. An 18-month follow-up report is required of the audited college to describe how it has addressed the recommendations in the audit report. The executive summary of each final audit report is posted on the PQAPA website until the next audit is completed.

According to the 2003 policy directive, all college programs, regardless of funding sources, must conform to the Credentials Framework and the Program Standards. Developed under the sponsorship of the Ontario government, both of the standards are outcome-based and crucial to the CVS and PQAPA procedures. The Program Standards<sup>[8]</sup> represent a provincial-level benchmark for all similar programs offered by different colleges, and the government began to produce those standards for college programs in the 1990s.

### **3.3 The PEQAB Framework for Degree-Granting Programs outside Public Universities**

In Ontario, public universities are granted full degree-granting authority by their legislations; this “public monopoly” was formalized under the Degree Granting Act of 1983 (Skolnik, 1987). Private universities are granted restricted degree-granting authority by the Legislative Assembly of Ontario. Any other type of postsecondary institutions that would like to offer degree programs has to go through a series of procedures to obtain the permission from the government. The Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) framework is part of this process.

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<sup>[7]</sup>There are five categories of maturity of quality assurance processes: minimal effort, reactive effort, formal effort, organizational effort, and mature effort (OCQAS, 2014, pp. 28-29).

<sup>[8]</sup>A program standard consists of vocational learning outcomes, a generic skills standard (known as essential employability skills), and general education requirements, all which are laid out consistently with the Credentials Framework. Not all college programs have corresponding Program Standards; however, those programs that have a Program Standard must meet all the requirements of the Standard. Those college programs that do not have existing Program Standards must develop a program description, which has to be aligned with the Credentials Framework as well. The vocational learning outcomes are typically developed under the leadership of a project officer seconded from an Ontario college to the government, OMTCU, with consultations with stakeholders of the affected programs from colleges and industry.

The PEQAB is an advisory board to the Ontario government minister responsible for postsecondary education. It was created and mandated by the Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000.<sup>[9]</sup> The legislation was developed after a public consultation as to whether to increase opportunities for degrees in Ontario (OMTCU, 2000). Essentially, the Act extends the scope of degree-program providers from public universities to public colleges, in-province private institutions, and out-of-province organizations, which are permitted to seek ministerial consent<sup>[10]</sup> as an additional option<sup>[11]</sup> in order to offer programs leading to a degree in Ontario. Applicant organizations can apply for ministerial consent for new programs and for renewal of the ministerial consent for ongoing programs. Working with public colleges, private in-province institutions, and out-of-province organizations, the PEQAB reviews their applications made under the 2000 Act and makes recommendations to the Minister. It operates under the leadership of a management board, with government-appointed members from various professional backgrounds.

The key component of the PEQAB process is quality assessment conducted by an expert review panel, which is appointed by the PEQAB. The panel reviews program quality and institutional capacity against PEQAB standards and benchmarks, and writes up a report to the PEQAB. Private organizations are also subject to an organization review by a separate panel. The applicant organization has an opportunity to submit a formal response to the assessment report. All the applications are posted on the PEQAB website, and interested parties from the public have an opportunity to provide comments by indicated deadlines. Applicants seeking renewal of ministerial consent need to go through a program self-study and a site visit by the program evaluation committee of the applying institution. By March 31, 2014, the PEQAB had completed the assessment of a total of 457 applications from 70 institutions (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board [PEQAB], 2014a).

The quality of proposed degree programs, whether from public or private organizations, is assessed against the same thirteen standards and related

<sup>[9]</sup> The Act can be accessed from the online repository of the Government of Ontario (2015).

<sup>[10]</sup> “Ministerial consents” are decisions of the Ontario government to permit private and/or foreign institutions to offer degree programs in Ontario. The practice started in 1994 when the NAFTA (the North American Free Trade Agreement) united Canada, the United States, and Mexico in a common market (Baker & Miosi, 2010). The consent is usually granted for five years, and a renewal of the consent must be sought.

<sup>[11]</sup> Under the Degree Granting Act (1984 ~ 2001), the predecessor of the 2000 Act, an Ontario-based institution required an act of Legislative Assembly of Ontario in order to grant degrees, offer programs leading to a degree, call itself a university, or advertise using the word university (PEQAB, 2014b, p. 1). Thus, seeking ministerial consent becomes an additional option under the 2000 Act.

benchmarks.<sup>[12]</sup> The central one is the degree level standard, which is comprised of degree standards for graduates of bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs in Ontario. These standards are the same as those ones for degree programs in the Ontario Qualifications Framework,<sup>[13]</sup> and overlap with the DLEs used in the Quality Assurance Framework for the university sector. Thus, a common set of degree standards is used by the Quality Council and the PEQAB.

### 3.4 Summary

It can be argued that the Ontario system of quality assurance for postsecondary education is heavily policy-driven and buttressed by the work of the three external quality assurance agencies as the pillars -- the Quality Council, the OCQAS, and the PEQAB. The related policies and processes are summarized in the following two tables from different points of view. Table 1 shows a comparison of the three quality assurance frameworks in terms of the agency, initiating legislation or policy, institutional stakeholders, mechanisms, approaches, processes, and standards.

Table 2 shows how various quality assurance mechanisms correspond to the different types of postsecondary institutions within the Ontario system. The table suggests that academic programs offered by publicly assisted Ontario universities and colleges, whether new or ongoing and inclusive of both degree and non-degree programs, are subject to certain formalized quality assurance mechanisms. For other types of institutions, some form of external assurance mechanisms is in place too. Thus, the Ontario quality assurance system appears generally well balanced among sectors.

## 4. Evaluation of the Ontario Quality Assurance System (2010 ~ 2014)

The operations and processes represented by the three quality assurance frameworks as discussed above speak to the following four features of the Ontario quality assurance system. Some of them are informed by the general model for quality assessment (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) and the Phase Model of quality assurance systems development (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002).

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<sup>[12]</sup> The thirteen standards are degree level; admission, promotion and graduation; program content; program delivery; capacity to deliver; credential recognition; regulation and accreditation; nomenclature; program evaluation; academic freedom and integrity; student protection; economic need; and non-duplication (PEQAB, 2014b, pp. 14-15).

<sup>[13]</sup> The Ontario Qualifications Framework lays out a spectrum of qualification descriptions and standards for all non-religious certificate, diploma, and degree programs offered under the auspices of Ontario. It can be found on the website of OMTCU (2015).

Table 1. Comparison of the Three External Quality Assurance Frameworks in Ontario

	Quality Assurance Framework	OCQAS Framework	PEQAB Framework
External quality assurance agencies	OUCQA, or the Quality Council	OCQAS	PEQAB
Legislations or policies	Quality Assurance Framework, 2010	The Minister's Binding Policy Directive: Framework for Programs of Instruction, 2003	Postsecondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000
Types of institutional stakeholders	Ontario (public) universities	Ontario (public) colleges	Ontario public colleges; Private career colleges; Organizations (private or public) based in other jurisdictions
External quality assurance mechanisms	New program appraisal (program-level); Institutional quality assurance process audit (institutional-level)	Credential validation (program-level); Program quality assurance process audit (institutional-level)	Degree program quality assessment (program-level) for the purpose of granting or renewal of ministerial consent; Organization review for private organizations (organizational-level)
Approaches	Learning outcomes based; Self-regulation through auditing; Developmental	Learning outcomes based; CVS: government-mandated; PQAPA: Self-regulation through auditing; Developmental	Learning outcomes based; Direct assessment; Government-mandated
Processes involved	Self-study; Peer review, with site visit; Reporting, providing opportunities for institutions to respond	Self-study; Peer review, with site visit; Reporting, providing opportunities for institutions to respond	Self-study; Peer review, with site visit; Reporting, providing opportunities for institutions to respond
Learning outcomes standards	Degree-Level Expectations (for undergraduate and graduate programs)	Credentials Framework; Learning outcomes in pre-defined Program Standards	Four sets of degree standards within the Ontario Qualifications Framework
Other standards	Evaluation criteria for new program proposals and program reviews	Six criteria for exemplary quality assurance processes	Thirteen standards and related benchmarks for quality programs

**Source:** This study.

Table 2. Association between the Quality Assurance System and the Postsecondary Education System in Ontario

Types of institution	Program status	External quality assurance mechanisms, including administering agencies
Public universities	New	New program appraisal by the Quality Council (Appraisal Committee)
	Ongoing	Institutional audit by the Quality Council (Audit Committee)
Public colleges	Regular (non-degree) programs -- new	Credential validation by OCQAS (CVS)
	Regular (non-degree) programs -- ongoing	Program quality assurance process audit by OCQAS (PQAPA), including a self-study requirement and an audit
	Degree programs -- new	Granting of ministerial consent, subject to recommendations by PEQAB after an external review by the PEQAB-appointed Quality Assessment Panel
	Degree programs -- ongoing	Renewal of ministerial consent, subject to recommendations by PEQAB after an external review by the PEQAB-appointed Quality Assessment Panel
Other (private institutions in Ontario, and out-of-province organizations)	New and ongoing degree programs	Granting or renewal of ministerial consent, subject to recommendations by PEQAB after an external review by the PEQAB-appointed Quality Assessment Panel and Organization Review Committee (for private organizations)

Source: This study.

#### 4.1 Formalized Quality Assurance Mechanisms with Diversity

In the Ontario quality assurance system, as shown in Table 1, all three quality assurance processes feature arms-length agencies, self-studies at postsecondary institutions, peer reviews with site visits, and high transparency in reporting with an opportunity for the evaluated institution or program to comment on the report. For ongoing programs at both universities and colleges, no direct relationship has been set up between the outcomes of the audit reports and any funding decisions. However, there are funding implications for new programs to be offered by public universities and colleges because funding approval is de facto approval of the program (Leyton-Brown, 2005). A new college program that fails credential validation by the CVS and a new university program that fails the approval by the Quality Council are not in good positions to seek governmental funding. In the actual practice, failures have rarely occurred partly due to the fact that the two agencies provide considerable amounts of support to applicants to bring their

proposed programs up to the standards. All these features attest to the elements in van Vught and Westerheijden's (1994) general model for quality assessment.

Table 1 also shows that although the three frameworks entail similar procedures, they involve quite diverse quality assurance mechanisms. Those mechanisms incorporate the institutional quality that involves institutional infrastructure and governance, as well as the program quality that involves the curriculum and outcomes of the program (Leyton-Brown, 2005). In addition to the internationally accepted practices of program appraisal and quality audits, the Ontario system also utilizes credential validation and granting or renewal of ministerial consent as quality assurance mechanisms. Credential validation is employed to honour the autonomy of Ontario colleges in managing their own academic programming. Use of ministerial consent is a practice that was carried forward from a previous governmental action for similar scenarios. They appear to be unique to Ontario.

Further, the themes of quality control, quality assurance, quality assessment, and quality improvement have all emerged in the Ontario quality assurance system. The government exerts strict control of final degree-granting authority by enforcing a ministerial consent mechanism. The PQAPA process makes a deliberate distinction between quality assurance and quality assessment by defining quality assessment as "the mechanism or procedures used to determine the extent to which quality exists" and quality assurance as "the mechanism or procedures used to assure or measure the level or existence of quality" (OCQAS, 2014, p. 5). In other words, the assumption behind quality assurance is that quality exists and the task of an external agency is to verify that the existing process has made an impact on academic programs. Further, all three frameworks take stock of the importance of continuous improvement in quality, rather than being satisfied with mere quality assurance. While the PEQAB process is more accountability-driven, continuous improvement is part of its benchmarks of the program evaluation standard. In practice, the QAF and the PQAPA processes are primarily formative and developmental in nature, and both require an implementation plan and a follow-up report to ensure continuous improvement.

#### **4.2 The Arms-Length Tripartite Relationship with a Distinction between Self-Regulation and Government Regulation**

All three quality assurance agencies maintain an arms-length relationship with postsecondary institutions and the government, with subtle but important

differences. The PEQAB is the only government-appointed agency of the three, but it independently manages the quality assessment process. The Quality Council is what Baker and Miosi (2010) called “university consortium agency.” It was created as part of the Council of Ontario Universities, a body on behalf of the university sector that promotes cooperation among public universities, and between them and the provincial government (Council of Ontario Universities [COU], 2012) and is funded by Ontario universities and governed by representatives almost entirely from Ontario universities. The QAF states that it “operates at arm’s length from universities and the government to ensure its independence” (OUCQA, 2014, p. 2). The OCQAS operates independently of the government and of any Ontario college, and its management board members are mostly representatives who are affiliated or associated with the Ontario college sector. Like the Quality Council, the service at OCQAS is “funded by, and responsible to, the 24 member colleges, and not to the government” and it is “owned and operated by the colleges,” as a past executive director emphasized (Klassen, 2012, p. 6).

Related to the different relationships with the government, the QAF process administered by the Quality Council and the PQAPA process under the OCQAS framework employ a self-regulation approach whereas the PEQAB framework essentially adopts a government regulation approach. Unlike the self-regulation of internal quality assurance executed by individual institutions, the system-level self-regulation is administered collectively (Baker & Mioni, 2010) -- through the Quality Council for the university sector and through the OCQAS for the college sector. Perhaps because of the nature of self-regulation in the QAF and PQAPA processes, the work of the Quality Council and the OCQAS is partly consultative and collaborative whereas the PEQAB does not have a consultation role to play.

The nature of self-regulation is exhibited by how the mechanisms were created as well as how they operate in actuality. The self-regulation approach to the OCQAS framework is well documented in the PQAPA orientation manual, which clearly states that the PQAPA is “a self-regulating process at the system level” (OCQAS, 2014, p. 5). The self-regulation approach is also reflected in the choice of using quality audits as the primary external quality assurance mechanism. As the PQAPA manual explains in the footnote, audit is used to mean that PQAPA “reviews processes, validates the college’s Program Quality Assurance record, and verifies that the process has the impact of improving programs” (OCQAS, 2014, p. 5). Thus, the self-regulatory function of the

OCQAS is fulfilled by the quality audit under PQAPA, which assumes the existence of quality and internal quality assurance mechanisms inside Ontario colleges and hence intends to find the evidence to verify this assumption (Klassen, 2012). As a past chair of the Management Board commented regarding the creation of the two components of the OCQAS, the government's mandate created CVS but it was the colleges themselves that created the PQAPA at the time when the government intended to reduce its involvement in managing college programs but grant Ontario colleges greater autonomy in program approval and development; therefore, establishing a self-regulating process for the whole college system was considered in the interests of both the government and the colleges (interview, November 21, 2013). OCQAS's ownership by the college sector was found not to inhibit the fulfillment of its functions in any way, according to the report of an external PQAPA review (Massy, 2006).

Similarly, the QAF is a self-regulatory policy although this is not made explicit in its document. Self-regulation began with its predecessor, the OCGS appraisal process, where public universities were bound to not implementing any new graduate programs until they were appraised by OCGS and found to be of good quality (Leyton-Brown, 2005). A key member on the QAF development taskforce stated that it was the Council of Ontario Universities who approved the creation of the Quality Council; in that sense, the Council was created by the Ontario universities themselves. He further explained, "So it is self-regulatory system, not imposed by the government but self-imposed by the system. It is a bit unusual because in many places, it is a government body that requires these things. Ontario is a little bit different -- the government has given the authority to the Council of Ontario Universities, or previously the OCGS or the UPRAC through OCAV.... The current mechanism is a continuation and a further formalization" (interview, October 30, 2013). A Quality Council staff member also verified this by stating that "it is a self-regulatory system.... When you self-regulate, because you don't want government coming in. The universities do not want the government of Ontario to do this work. I think their intention was to make it more rigorous than anybody else so that it can't be criticized, it can't be accused of being weak.... It's a smart strategy for the universities to have" (interview, March 27, 2014). Further, the QAF requires all Ontario universities to develop their own institutional quality assurance processes, so that they take ownership and commit themselves to implementing their own mechanisms; they also voluntarily agree that this whole process is overseen by the Quality Council. This is a scheme of "self-regulation with rules" (Lang, 2015). The use of the self-



regulation approach suggests that the Ontario quality assurance system is in the relatively mature Phase 4, according to Jeliaskova and Westerheijden's (2002) model.

### **4.3 Mixed Phases of Quality Assurance Development and the Maturing Process**

When examined in light of Jeliaskova and Westerheijden's (2002) Phase Model, various quality issues could be captured by the problem statements in the model, albeit not precisely. Before 2000, there was high trust in the quality of programs at Ontario universities and colleges, instead of serious doubts; in addition, the primary role of quality assurance was not to identify sub-standard educational programs. However and legitimately, there were serious concerns about the quality of degree programs offered by emergent degree providers, such as public colleges and out-of-province organizations. Some level of quality culture existed in the university sector due to the previous OCGS and UPRAC mechanisms while some were concerned that the college sector was over-supervised by the government.

The three quality assurance frameworks were established to address those quality issues. The PEQBA framework, as part of the ministerial consent process, was created to address the concern about degree-granting issues and assure that the degree programs offered by those emergent degree providers follow the same standards as those programs at public universities; therefore, its assessment is mostly summative. The self-regulatory quality audits that QAF and OCQAS frameworks have adopted are to stimulate the institutional capacity for quality assurance and continuous quality improvement; thus, the processes are mostly formative. Experience elsewhere shows that use of academic audits as a quality assurance mechanism can contribute to achieving the dual goals of accountability and improvement (Dill, 2000). The Ontario experience seems to affirm that accountability and improvement can be balanced through quality audits. As such, the quality assurance solutions appear to be at different phases of the Phase Model, depending on the nature of the problems.

Further, under the QAF and OCQAS frameworks, postsecondary institutions are not dictated by the government to solve quality assurance issues but are guided to build their own capacity for quality management. The responsibility for quality assurance is mostly in the hands of postsecondary institutions themselves. The expanded institutional autonomy for quality assurance reflects a level of

maturity in managing quality issues on the part of postsecondary institutions. A past OCQAS director used an analogy to describe this maturing process: “It is like kids. When they are little, they are regulated by their parents. At some point, you hope they become self-regulated. They learn how to make good decisions and look after themselves. It is the same for the evolution of the college system. It was time, particularly with the devolution of responsibility and autonomy, that colleges could say ‘We can do this ourselves, we can make sure that our programs are meeting the standards, we have a quality system and we don’t need the government to be telling us about it’” (interview, June 20, 2013). This maturing process reflects the evolution from Phase 1 to Phase 4 in Jeliaskova and Westerheijden’s (2002) Model.

An indicator of the maturing process is the shifted focus of quality assurance from external to internal dynamics; in the meantime, this shift gives rise to standardization. The implementation of the external quality assurance mechanisms helps bring forth organizational changes within postsecondary institutions by affecting their internal quality management. Each Ontario university has to establish its own quality assurance process, known as the IQAP, which more or less follows a standardized institutional process prescribed by the QAF. Within the college sector, internal quality assurance mechanisms become more alike than before as a result of their being evaluated against the same six quality criteria set by the PQAPA. The quality management of degree programs, at public and private organizations, has to include a program evaluation committee, thus taking on a similar governance structure for quality assurance, as a result of the requirements made by PEQAB to those programs seeking ministerial consent. Academic programs at Ontario colleges and universities have to abide by the learning outcomes and academic standards required by the three quality assurance frameworks. As such, the external quality assurance mechanisms are steering changes in many areas within postsecondary institutions in Ontario, and the internal quality assurance processes are becoming more consistent and standardized. The push toward standardization is often found problematic by university faculty.

#### **4.4 Gaps in the System**

A significant gap in the Ontario system is inadequacy in quality assurance mechanisms for private educational providers. Although those private providers that offer programs leading to non-degree credentials are, in principle, subjected to the same Credentials Framework as public colleges, they do not have to go

through the OCQAS processes, thus falling short of external quality assurance. Although degree program offering is under the tight control of the government, the ministerial consent mechanism applies only to the beginning stage of a new program, and how the program performs later on is mainly left to the internal mechanism at individual institutions.

Another deficiency lies in the lack of clarity of some key areas in the Quality Assurance Framework. As alluded to earlier, it is not clear enough in the QAF and its guide that the framework is essentially self-regulatory, rather than being imposed by the government. When this distinction is not clarified, misunderstandings have occurred and challenges have arisen when the QAF is implemented. A program evaluation committee member revealed his incorrect assumption about the QAF and the frustration of some of his colleagues at his university by saying “It is not our committee that says ‘You have to do this, this, and this.’ Some of the guidelines we have to address are being dictated to us by the province. They want these things to be addressed in the programs. We are really just following the law. People don’t understand why we have to do this. [We say] ‘Well, if you don’t get your program evaluated, you can’t deliver your program’” (interview, April 28, 2014). A Quality Council staff shared how she addressed the frustration by saying, “I think many universities have struggled with certain parts of it and I often say to them, ‘Well, it is your policy.’ Especially when you have lots of turnover in personnel in universities, sometimes people will express a frustration with it. I will remind them that it is something they created” (interview, March 27, 2014). Similar frustration and difficulty can be diluted or avoided when the nature of the QAF is made clear to those who implement the framework.

Finally, the three quality assurance frameworks were developed on relatively independent paths, without a master design. The operations of the three quality assurance agencies remain quite independent and uncoordinated. There is a lack of formal venues in which the three agencies could share experiences and lessons learned. Although the DLEs in the QAF and the degree standards in the PEQAB framework are consistent and overlapping, disagreement exists in terms of the authorship of those standards. This lack of coordination may be a vestige of the prior separately operating arrangements of quality assurance and result partly from a lack of totality in Canadian postsecondary education itself (Jones, 1997) or the absence of a systematic approach to policy-making in Ontario (Royce, 1998).

## 5. Interpretations and Conclusions

The emergence of the Ontario quality assurance system appears to reflect a path trajectory of governance structure development of the Ontario postsecondary education system as well as variations to address emerging issues. The practice of setting up an advisory body between the government and postsecondary institutions started when the first governmental department was established in the 1960s. As Jones (1997) documented, in 1964 when the Ontario government, for the first time, created a governmental department managing university affairs, they also created a neutral advisory committee, which was designed to play a buffer role, rather than act as a direct appendage of the government. To address degree-granting issues with emergent program providers, the PEQAB becomes another body that plays such a buffer role.

Historically, Ontario universities have a high level of institutional autonomy. Maintaining high autonomy at universities is always an important consideration and direct control of the university sector has never been an option or preference for the government (Jones, 1997; Royce, 1998) although university autonomy was challenged from time to time by some government initiatives (Shanahan, Jones, Fisher, & Rubenson, 2014). Establishment of a self-regulatory quality assurance mechanism through an intermediary body (the Council of Ontario Universities) appears to be an optimal solution given the governance tradition in Ontario and the need to balance accountability and institutional autonomy.

The college sector has traditionally been far less autonomous than the university sector in Canada. However, as the government moved in the direction of deregulation in order to encourage competition and reduce the governmental share of funding, Ontario colleges were encouraged to become more autonomous. This tendency emerged in the 1990s when the province experienced financial constraints (Jones, 1997). The 2003 policy directive, which granted colleges' boards of governors the authority to approve programs, was a policy movement toward greater institutional autonomy of Ontario colleges. Thus, Ontario colleges gained responsibility and flexibility, and the relationship between the colleges and the government shifted "from a command and control model, to an accountable for results model" (Charles, 2011, p. 278). The PQAPA process represents another important mechanism that helps cultivate and formalize the internal quality assurance processes within a sector-wide framework.

It can also be argued that the Ontario quality assurance system demonstrates

a result of the interactions between the local and the global. The high institutional autonomy and the limited policy capacity of the government to intervene have, to a large extent, determined the quality assurance arrangements in Canadian universities (Weinrib & Jones, 2014), and influenced the formulation of quality assurance processes in Ontario. The Ontario quality assurance system is a concrete example that exhibits those Canadian characteristics and the sector-specific conditions as presented above. On the other hand, globalization has inevitably exerted considerable impact on the three Ontario quality assurance frameworks. All three were developed under the global trend of strengthening accountability and continuous improvement in postsecondary education. Aspirations to align with “international best practices” are manifested in the documents of all three frameworks. Use of the learning outcomes approach and the tendency of standardization in processes are also evidence of global influence.

The two conceptual models (Jeliazkova & Westerheijden, 2002; van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994) used in this paper are useful analytical tools for examining the characteristics of a quality assurance system. However, the Ontario case shows that certain distinctive features of a particular system may be hard to schematize. One single system can incorporate quality assurance mechanisms that address problems across different phases at the same time, as the Ontario system does. Thus, the Phase Model, though helpful to better understand the development of quality assurance schemes, may be oversimplified to represent the complexity of a quality assurance system.

The landscape of quality assurance for Ontario postsecondary education has changed significantly since 2000. Before that, the programming at Ontario colleges was overseen by the government, quality assurance of university undergraduate and graduate programs was subject to completely separate mechanisms, and there was no formal quality assurance procedure for degree education provided outside public universities. Currently, a comprehensive and relatively mature quality assurance system with diverse but rigorous mechanisms is in place, consisting of three quality assurance frameworks that have evolved on independent paths. The three frameworks embody careful deliberations of needs for accountability and continuous improvement and the tripartite relationship among the postsecondary institutions, the government, and the quality assurance agencies. They represent important accomplishments in strengthening quality assurance mechanisms in Ontario, although those mechanisms remain as uncoordinated as before.

In 2015, a new mandate of institutional accreditation for Ontario's college sector is taking effect under the OCQAS framework. This reflects another impact of globalization. A brand new chapter of quality assurance is unfolding for postsecondary education in Canada, where no institutional accreditation previously existed in history. The Ontario quality assurance system continues to evolve and will take on additional meanings.

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