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**Placing Canadian Quality
Assurance Initiatives in an
International Context**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Quality, Standards, and Quality Standards	4
Quality	4
Quality as exceptional or as excellence	6
Quality as perfection or consistency.....	6
Quality as fitness for/of purpose	6
Quality as value for money	7
Quality as transformation.....	7
Standards	7
Quality standards	10
Quality Assurance Purposes	10
Accountability	11
Control	11
Compliance	12
Improvement	12
Quality Assurance Approaches	13
The Impact of Quality Assurance on the Quality of Degrees	15
Learning Outcomes	19
Credit Accumulation and Transfer	22
Quality Culture	28
Responsive quality culture.....	30
Reactive quality culture	30
Regenerative quality culture	30
Reproductive quality culture.....	31
References	32

Introduction

Canadian quality assurance initiatives vary between provinces and territories. There are attempts to harmonize aspects of quality assurance, such as credit transfer arrangements. Rather more generally, the quality assurance process in most areas tends to conform to the generic international model of self-evaluation, peer review and report. As in many international settings, the statistical data and performance indicators have been entered into the equation with varying degree of utility and success.

What does emerge from an outsider perspective on the situation in Canada, is something of a renaissance in higher education policy. At the forefront, as Kirby (2007) characterizes it, is a shift from humanist to economic-utilitarian objectives in higher education. This is evidenced in reviews of the higher education system in the provinces of Ontario, British Columbia, Alberta, and Newfoundland and Labrador that are linked to economic growth, competitive international environments, and the need for a highly skilled workforce. The renaissance is not just because massification and economic utilitarianism have inevitable consequences but because there appears to be a pause and a re-think about what constitutes a quality education. The cautious, collaborative, and research-informed approach of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) is an example of this renaissance spirit.

The Council will research learning quality practices. These will include practices that are being applied to university and college education, apprenticeship and life-long learning at the postsecondary level for students of all ages and at all stages of life. Research will not be limited to quality learning practices in place in Ontario, and will encompass practices in other jurisdictions to determine if any would be worth adopting in Ontario. The Council will then consider the most effective methods for making information about quality available to current and prospective students....A major aspect of the Council's work is to promote a constructive dialogue among all those with an interest in higher education. To that end, the Council plans to host a series of workshops and conferences to supplement its research activities. (HEQCO, 2008)

To some extent this reflects international developments. From the late 1980s through to the middle of this decade, higher education has been characterized by a headlong rush to introduce quality assurance processes geared primarily to accountability. The underlying principle was that accountability will generate improvement, or at the very least a sense of responsibility within the academy.

Of late, there has been a re-think, for example, within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a pause for reflection about the best way to undertake quality assurance, how to engage academics, how to involve students in a meaningful way, how to develop quality cultures, and to take forward a European-wide process that encompasses diverse systems. The purpose is to enable mobility within (a larger) Europe; a mobility that is primarily directed to economic-utilitarian outcomes but one that is also about promoting European citizenship.

What is notable in the Canadian context, and somewhat different from the process in the EHEA, is the concern to “measure” quality (Finnie and Usher, 2005; Saunders, 2007). Finnie and Usher in their *Measuring the Quality of Post-secondary Education* propose a causal deterministic model, which is likely to be unworkable in practice as well as epistemologically suspect. Saunders adopts a laudable normative approach arguing for value-added but provides no real clues as to how the tricky problem of measuring value-added would be achieved.

Measuring quality should involve measuring how institutional resources and alternative pedagogies are associated with learning outcomes, while controlling for the “beginning characteristics” of the students. One could then measure the relationship between learning outcomes and desired final outcomes....

It is not satisfactory to measure the quality of a university or college by the grades of the incoming students (beginning characteristics) or the size of the library (resource inputs) or the employment rates of graduates (outcomes). What matters is the “value-added”: the extent to which the students exit PSE with better skills and greater knowledge than what they came in with, and how these greater [word missing] contribute to social and individual goals. (Saunders 2006, p. 35)

There is a stark difference between the accounts of quality measurement in Finnie and Usher (2005) and the approach fostered in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) (ENQA, 2005).

Finnie and Usher’s characterization of the different ways that quality is measured in practice is not recognizable in a European context. For example they appear to confound minimum standards with continuous quality improvement audits. They state that

The minimum standards process typically starts with a self-audit. This process may vary somewhat from place to place, but the principle behind it is common enough. During the self-audit, the unit under review gathers information on the quality of its program from a number of different sources—comments from students, alumni, and employers; faculty publication records, etc. In jurisdictions where regional or national organizations have put in place certain recommended standards, the institution or unit must use these data to self-assess whether or not it is meeting these standards. (Finnie and Usher, 2005, p. 6)

This may work in Canada but in a European context, as will be explored in more detail below, confounds the purpose, approach, object, focus, and method of external quality evaluation. In Europe, audits are normally of institutional processes, and these are not explicitly judged against minimum standards; assessments are made of the quality of programs and, beyond some professional areas, are a relatively rare external evaluative process as opposed to an internal one; and it is accreditation that tends to a minimum-standards approach. It is not entirely correct for Finnie and Usher to suggest that within Europe “The minimum standards approach” is “the foundation of the periodic review

process (often called ‘cyclical reviews’ or ‘program reviews’)” and that “in European OECD countries, the minimum standards approach has always gone hand-in-hand with some form of government participation or oversight.” Indeed, the situation in Europe has always been diverse, and the Bologna process is an attempt to harmonize in the wake of the stepping back of governments from control of higher education in most jurisdictions, although in such countries as the UK and Ireland institutions have traditionally been autonomous, and government intervention has been growing since the 1980s.

Surprisingly, from a European perspective, Finnie and Usher (2005) equate continuous quality improvement with quality control procedures such as ISO9000. In Europe, ISO9000 has been tried in different settings over the last twenty years but has not taken off in higher education and has never, where attempted within institutions, successfully penetrated the academic realm, being almost exclusively the preserve of support functions. Much the same can be said of most of the other management fads: Total Quality Management and EFQM/Baldrige through Investors in People to “management by walking about.” There has been much debate about the relationship between ISO9000 and TQM, and the general view is that the former is about conformance to codified practices whereas the latter attempts continual improvement. In Europe, where a “fitness-for-purpose” approach to external quality assurance predominates, at least in theory, this is designed as a continuous improvement process quite unconnected to codified approaches such as ISO9000.

Finnie and Usher (2005) refer to key performance indicators as a means of measuring quality. From a European perspective, performance indicators are just one of a range of methods used within the different approaches and serve varied purposes. Similarly, their “learning impacts” approach, while underpinned by a focus on the learning experience rather than inputs, focuses mainly on a single survey that would, in a European context, be regarded as just one method that may or may not be suited to a given purpose of quality assurance.

Although rankings are a growing feature of the public information about higher education and institutions are putting increasing efforts into manipulating their position within such tables, they are not regarded, within Europe, as a meaningful element of quality assurance. There is also methodological skepticism about rankings in Canada. At heart, the *ESG* are about encouraging quality improvement and increasing transparency and, thus, about accountability; and it is the institutions that have the key responsibility for this, although external quality assurance is assumed to play an important role in encouraging this process, especially where institutions are becoming more autonomous.

The “renaissance” in Europe is evidenced by the growing shift from control and accountability purposes of quality assurance to the purpose of improvement or enhancement, which is currently the preferred term. Control is still important in some countries, mainly in the East, with a rapidly growing private provision, but it is also a necessary feature in places like the UK as degree-awarding power is being widened. Accountability will not go away while taxpayers contribute the main share of the higher education budget, but the emphasis is more on trust and encouragement through dialogue rather than inspection. There is a shift from system to quality culture with an emphasis on creativity and innovation. This does not mean that the bureaucracy has vanished or that

agencies are not still viewed with suspicion by academics, but the atmosphere is changing. Along with this growing dialogic approach is a shift in emphasis from inputs to outputs, entwined with the emergence of the student-centred approach, with the whole continent developing expertise in learning outcomes, although some countries are a long way behind others. There is also, to some extent, a shift in emphasis from quality toward standards of achievement, although the latter is much more a concern of politicians, employers, and the institutions themselves than of the quality agencies, most of which are not mandated to judge standards.

This is evident in Canada: In February 2007, ministers responsible for advanced education endorsed the *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada* for the following reasons:

- To provide assurance to the public, students, employers, and postsecondary institutions at home and abroad that new programs and new institutions of higher learning meet appropriate standards and that performance against the standards will be assessed by appropriate means
- To provide a context for identifying how degree credentials compare in level and standard to those in other jurisdictions, with a view to facilitating the search for continuous improvement, the education and training of an internationally competitive workforce, and international recognition of the quality of Canadian credentials
- To improve student access to further study at the postsecondary level by establishing a degree-level standards context in which policies on the transfer of credits and credential recognition may be developed and, in fairness to students who choose non-traditional providers, to focus discussion of credit transfer and credential recognition on the academic standards that the programs involved have met. (CMEC, 2007b)

Before exploring some of these different aspects, let's pause to examine the nature of quality, its relationship to standards, and the methods, focus, and purpose of quality assurance. This part of the paper will draw on some other published work, including an article in the *Bologna Handbook* entitled "Understanding Quality" (Harvey, 2006a).

Quality, standards, and quality standards

It is important to distinguish "quality" from "standards" and both of them from "quality standards."

Quality

There tends to be a reluctance to define the concept of quality in higher education. While I do not want to impose one single definition, it is important to clarify some prevailing (implicit) definitions (Table 1).

Table 1: Definitions of quality and standards.

QUALITY	DEFINITION
Exceptional	Is a traditional concept linked to the idea of “excellence,” usually operationalized as exceptionally high standards of academic achievement. Quality is achieved if the standards are surpassed.
Perfection or consistency	Focuses on process and sets specifications that it aims to meet. Quality in this sense reflects the interrelated ideas of zero defects and getting things right the first time.
Fitness for purpose	Judges quality in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose. The purpose may be customer-defined to meet requirements or, in education, institution-defined to reflect institutional mission or course objectives. NB: There are some who suggest that “fitness of purpose” is a definition of quality, but it is a specification of the parameters of fitness and not itself a definition of the quality concept.
Value for money	Assesses quality in terms of return on investment or expenditure. At the heart of the value-for-money approach in education is the notion of accountability. Public services, including the provision of education, are expected to be accountable to the funders. Increasingly, students are also considering their own investment in higher education in value-for-money terms.
Transformation	Sees quality as a process of change, which in higher education adds value to students through their learning experience. Education is not a service for a customer but an ongoing process of transformation of the participant. This leads to two notions of transformative quality in education: enhancing the consumer and empowering the consumer.
STANDARDS	DEFINITION
Academic standards	The demonstrated ability to meet specified level of academic attainment. For pedagogy, the ability of students to be able to do those things designated as appropriate at a given level of education. Usually, the measured competence of an individual in attaining specified (or implied) course aims and objectives, operationalized via performance on assessed pieces of work. For research, the ability to undertake effective scholarship or produce new knowledge, which is assessed through peer recognition.
Standards of competence	Demonstration that a specified level of ability on a range of competencies has been achieved. Competencies may include general transferable skills required by employers; academic (“higher level”) skills implicit or explicit in the attainment of degree status or in a post-graduation academic apprenticeship; particular abilities congruent with induction into a profession.
Service standards	Are measures devised to assess identified elements of the service provided against specified benchmarks. Elements assessed include activities of service providers and facilities within which the service takes place. Benchmarks specified in contracts such as student charters tend to be quantified and restricted to measurable items. Post-hoc measurement of customer opinions (satisfaction) is used as the indicator of service provision. Thus, service standards in higher education parallel consumer standards.

Organizational standards	Attainment of the formal recognition of systems to ensure effective management of organizational processes and clear dissemination of organizational practices.
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Source: Adapted from Harvey, 1995; a version in Harvey, 2007a. © Lee Harvey, 2007

Quality as exceptional or as excellence

The first notion of quality sees it as something special or exceptional. There are three variations on this. First, a traditional notion of quality that implies exclusivity. Quality is apodictic (*expressing absolute certainty*), not judged against any criteria. The traditional concept provides no definable means of determining quality and is replicated in reputational statistical ratings such as the *Times Higher Education Supplement's* international rating tables). Second, asserting excellence and providing ways to establish excellent provision, sometimes through identifying aspirational benchmark standards. Third, checking standards: rather than difficult to attain, the checks are based on attainable criteria encapsulated in minimum or 'threshold' benchmarks.

Quality as perfection or consistency

Quality as perfection or consistency involves a shift from measurement against outcome standards to measurement against process standards with a focus on reliability. Quality is defined as conformance to specification (zero defects assured through mechanisms such as ISO9000). Quality as perfection/consistency turns quality into a relative concept. There are no absolutes against which the output can be assessed, no universal benchmarks; quality is gauged by consistency of specified provision. The underlying quality culture reflects the idea of delegated responsibility. A quality culture requires a facilitative managerial infrastructure alongside a trusting delegation of the academic process and its support to those who directly engage with students or undertake front-line research.

Quality as fitness for/of purpose

Quality is also defined as fitness for purpose of a product or service. Fitness for purpose judges quality by the extent to which the product or service fits a stated purpose. Fitness for purpose raises the questions of Whose purpose? and How is fitness assessed? For some, the objectives are set externally and fitness for purpose becomes compliance. For others, the purpose is a more contentious issue, and the notion of fitness *of* purpose has been introduced to evaluate whether the quality-related intentions of an organization are adequate. Fitness of purpose is not used as a definition of quality because it simply specifies the purpose rather than engages with the quality concept.

Broadly, fitness for purpose has either a customer-specified purpose or a mission-specified purpose — and the latter dominates in higher education. Fitness-for-purpose-based quality assurance approaches are designed to evaluate institutional mission fulfilment but, despite the intention, all quality assurance systems have an overlay of generic requirements. In short, the institution or program is not solely judged on its ability to fulfil its mission but on whether it complies with national, governmental, disciplinary, professional, or other threshold expectations.

Quality as value for money

Value for money is a definition of quality that judges the quality of provision, processes, or outcomes against the monetary cost, both overt and hidden. Value for money sees quality as return on investment or as a measure of efficiency.

Quality as transformation

Quality as *transformation* is “a classic notion” of quality that involves a “qualitative change” from one state to another (Harvey and Green, 1993). In an educational setting, for example, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students. At one level it focuses on the value-added as a result of the educational experience but, at a more profound level, it views transformation as an empowering process that gives power to participants to influence their own transformation. At its epitome, it involves developing critical reflective thinking. This requires an approach to teaching and learning that goes beyond requiring students “to assimilate a body of knowledge and be able to apply it analytically; it is about encouraging students to challenge preconceptions, their own and those of their peers and teachers” (Harvey, 2006a, p. 24).

Standards

There are four realms of standards in higher education: academic, competence, service, and organizational (Table 1). They relate to different conceptions of quality, and there are preferred approaches for each node. (Table 2)

Table 2: Relationship between quality and standards in higher education and means of assurance (items in parentheses are indirect assurance mechanisms)

Standards Quality	Academic standards	Standards of competence	Service standards	Organizational standards
Exceptional	Emphasis on summative assessment of knowledge and, implicitly, some “higher-level” skills. Implicit normative gold standard. Comparative evaluation of research output. Élitism: the presupposition of a need to maintain pockets of high quality	Linked to professional competence; emphasis mainly on traditional demarcation between knowledge and (professional) skills.	Input-driven assumptions of resource-linked service/facilities. Good facilities, well-qualified staff, etc. “guarantee” service standards. Reluctance to expose professional (teaching) competence to scrutiny.	Clear role in the hierarchy reflecting academic status and experience. Often a heavy emphasis on “traditional values”. Strong emphasis on autonomy and academic freedom. Aversion to transparency.

	and standards in a mass education system.			
	Assured by: Monitoring standards Research assessment Teacher assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Monitoring standards Professional accreditation	Assured by: Accreditation (Performance indicators)	Assured by: Institutional accreditation (Audit of quality processes)
Perfection or consistency	A target level of academic standard is consistently achieved (year on year).	Expectation of a minimum prescribed level of professional competence. Problem in assessing for “zero defects.”	Primarily relates to reliable and consistent student grading and to administrative processes, such as accuracy and reliability of record keeping, timetables, coursework arrangements.	Right the first time. Document procedures, regulations and good practice. Obtain ISO9000 certification.
	Assured by: (Monitoring standards)	Assured by: Monitoring standards (Accreditation)	Assured by: Participant/user feedback (Audit) (Assessment)	Assured by: External QM certification (Accreditation)
Fitness for purpose (Fitness of purpose)	Theoretically, standards should relate to the defined objectives that relate to the purpose of the course (or institution). Summative assessment should be criteria referenced, although because purposes often include a comparative element (e.g., in mission statement) these are mediated by norm-referenced criteria.	Explicit specification of skills and abilities related to objectives. Evidence required to at least identify threshold standards. Professional competence primarily assessed in terms of threshold minimums against professional body requirements for practice. This is similar to the excellence approaches to checking minimum standards.	The purpose involves the provision of a service. Thus, the process is assessed on (minimum) standards for the purpose — usually teaching competence, the link between teaching and research, student support (academic and non-academic), and other facilities. Purpose is, for students, often judged against expectations.	Ensure appropriate mechanisms in place to assess whether practices and procedures fit the stated mission-based purposes.

	Assured by: Assessment (Accreditation)	Assured by: Monitoring standards (Accreditation Subject assessment)	Assured by: Customer charters/ surveys (Accountability audit) (Assessment) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Institutional accountability audit
Value for money	Maintenance or improvement of academic outcomes (graduate standards and research output) for the same (or declining) unit of resource. That is, ensure greater efficiency. Concern that efficiency gains work in the opposite direction to quality improvement. Provide students with an academic experience (qualification, training, personal development) to warrant the investment.	Maintain or improve the output of generally “employable” graduates for the same unit of resource. Similarly, ensure a continual or increasing supply of recruits to post-graduation professional bodies. Provide students with an educational experience that increases competence, in relation to career advancement, which ensures a return on investment.	Customer satisfaction analyses (student, employers, funding bodies) to assess process and outcomes. Students and other stakeholders are seen as “paying customers.” Customer charters specify minimum levels of service (and facilities) that students (parents, employers) can expect.	Relies heavily on periodic or <i>ad hoc</i> reviews of whether organizational structure is effective and efficient, often informed by management information (especially basic output statistics).
	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Performance indicators Graduate feedback (Accreditation)	Assured by: Customer surveys and charters (Performance indicators)	Assured by: (Institutional accountability audit) (Performance indicators)
Transformation	Assessment of students’ acquisition of transformative knowledge and skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation)	Provide students with enhanced skills and abilities that empower them to continue learning and to engage effectively with the complexities of the “outside” world.	Emphasis on specification and assessment of standards of service and facilities that enable the process of student learning <i>and</i> the acquisition of transformative	Emphasis on organizational structure that encourages dialogue, team working and, ultimately, empowerment of the learner. Delegated responsibility for

against explicit objectives. Focus on adding value rather than gold standards. Because transformation includes empowerment, formative as well as summative assessment is required. Transformative research standards are assessed on their <i>impact</i> in relation to objectives.	Assessment of students in terms of the acquisition of transformative skills (analysis, critique, synthesis, innovation) and the transformative impact they have post-graduation.	abilities.	quality and standards. Innovation, responsiveness and “trust” are prominent.
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Assured by: Value-added performance indicators. (External examination) (Accreditation)	Assured by: Value-added. Professional accreditation	Assured by: Participant feedback (Accreditation) (Assessment)	Assured by: Improvement audit
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Source: Adapted from Harvey (1995), a version in Harvey, (2006a, 2007a) © Lee Harvey, 2007

Quality standards

“Quality” and “standards” are different: the former is essentially about process and the latter refer to the level (grading) of the outcome. “Quality standards” so-called are confusing because they are expected norms against which process quality and outcome standards are measured as in the *ESG* (ENQA 2005). The analogy would be a golf score. The way the player tackles the course would be the quality of the play, the number of strokes the player takes would be the standard, and the par score for the course (the number of strokes a good player is expected to take) would be the quality standard.

Quality assurance purposes¹

The four purposes or rationales as in Harvey and Newton, 2005; Harvey 2006a for quality assurance are accountability, control, compliance, and improvement.

¹ This and the next section draw heavily on previous work including Harvey (2006, 2007).

Accountability

Accountability is about institutions taking responsibility for the service they provide and the public money they spend. Accountability has been the dominant underlying rationale for introducing quality evaluation and is closely linked, in some spheres, with value-for-money notions of quality.

A second aspect of accountability is to students: assurance that the program of study is organized and run properly, and that an appropriate educational experience is both promised and delivered. This accountability notion is consistent when the focus is on service delivery with a *fitness-for-purpose* definition of quality or when linked to inputs to an excellence definition. When the focus is on the learning process, it comes closer to a transformation definition of quality.

A third accountability purpose of quality evaluation procedures is the generation of public information that funders can use to aid funding allocation decisions and prospective students and graduate recruiters can use to inform choice. This accountability concern is commensurate with *excellent* definitions of quality when choice is based on hierarchical analysis and with *fitness-for-purpose* when based on appropriateness for a specific end, or on a *transformation* definition when based on suitability of delivery and learning environment.

Control

Control is about ensuring the integrity of the higher education sector, in particular making it difficult for poor or rogue providers to continue operating and making access to the sector dependent on the fulfilment of criteria of adequacy.

In many countries, especially those with a significant private sector, governments seek to control unrestrained growth in higher education in an increasingly unrestricted market. They may do this via financial controls or ministerial decree but, increasingly, quality monitoring and accreditation are being used to restrict market-led expansion.

Linked to this is the perceived need to ensure the status and standing and legitimacy of higher education. External review is used to ensure that the principles and practices of higher education are not being eroded or flouted, thereby undermining the intrinsic quality of university-level education and research.

The control aspect of quality evaluation specifically addresses the comparability of standards: that is, the standard or level of student academic or professional achievement, nationally and internationally. Attempts have been made to “benchmark” academic standards including externally set and marked examinations; specification of the content of syllabuses; threshold descriptors of outcomes; external examiners to ensure inter-institutional comparability of awards. The use of external examiners, for example, is well established in some countries as a means of making comparisons between programs within subject disciplines.

Compliance

Compliance means ensuring that institutions adopt procedures, practices, and policies that are considered by funders and governments to be desirable for the proper conduct of the sector and to ensure its quality. Government expectations include various forms of compliance that go beyond financial accountability and include the achievement of policy objectives. Governments place increasing emphasis on securing specified outputs and outcomes from publicly-funded activities in response to community expectations about improving service quality and policy effectiveness (PA Consulting, 2000).

There are other stakeholders who seek compliance through quality monitoring, notably professional or regulatory bodies who may use quality monitoring to check that their preferences or policies are being acknowledged or implemented. At its simplest level, quality monitoring has encouraged, or even forced, compliance in the production of information, be it statistical data, prospectuses, or course documents.

In addition, there is pressure to ensure comparability of provision and procedures, within and between institutions, including international comparisons.

Improvement

The *improvement* purpose, sometimes also referred to as enhancement, is less about constraint and more about the encouragement of adjustment and change. Most systems of external review claim to encourage improvement; however, it has been a secondary feature of most systems, especially at the initial stage. As systems move into second or third phases, the improvement element has been given more attention. Sweden and Finland are unusual in starting with improvement.

However, do external quality assurance processes set out to improve academic or research quality? Or is the aim to improve standards? Is the purpose to directly improve the student experience or is it to improve the way the institution monitors its own activities? Or is improvement about transparency and the provision of program documentation and outcomes information?

The improvement function of quality assurance procedures is normally about encouraging institutions to reflect upon their practices with a view to enabling a process of continuous improvement of the learning process and the range of outcomes.

Quality assurance approaches

There are four broad types of quality assurance processes although the methods adopted extensively overlap. The four are: accreditation, audit, assessment, and standards checking. *Accreditation* is about providing a stamp of approval that the program or institution meets or exceeds minimum expectations. *Audit* is a process of reviewing procedures in place, but it is not accompanied by any threshold judgment. *Assessment* judges the level of inputs, processes, or outputs. *Standards checking* examines output standards and the means by which output standards are assessed internally; it includes external examination of academic achievement or professional competence and performance indicators or student evaluations of service provision (Harvey, 2004–8).

It should be noted that the processes of quality assurance are quite separate from the concept of quality. *Quality* is to *quality assurance* what *intelligence* is to *IQ tests*. Quality, in higher education is, for example, about the nature of learning. Quality assurance is about convincing others about the adequacy of the processes of learning. However, when the term quality is mentioned in higher education circles, it is often taken as shorthand for quality assurance processes.

Briefly, as mentioned above, purpose of and approach to quality assurance are two of five aspects in developing a methodology of quality assurance that also embodies the object, focus, and method of the quality assurance process. The object of quality assurance may be the provider, the program, the learner, or the output; and the focus might be on governance, curriculum and content, the learning experience, and the mode of delivery through to the financial viability and the organizational processes. Methods include self-assessment, inspection, document analysis, performance indicators, and peer review (Figure 1). In essence there are a myriad of paths through Figure 1.

Focusing on purpose and approach and linking those to the different notions of quality and standards results in a nested framework. The four purposes and the four broad approaches to quality assurance intersect (Figure 2), providing 16 potential alternatives — space prohibits examination of these here. These then provide alternatives within the cells of the quality and standards matrix. Not all 320 potential intersections (Figure 3) are likely to operate in practice, but the figure shows how complex the quality assurance process is, and that complexity excludes the diverse objects, focus, and methods of any specific evaluative mode.

Figure 1: Facets of external quality assurance



Adapted from Harvey, 2004

Figure 2: Quality assurance purposes and approaches

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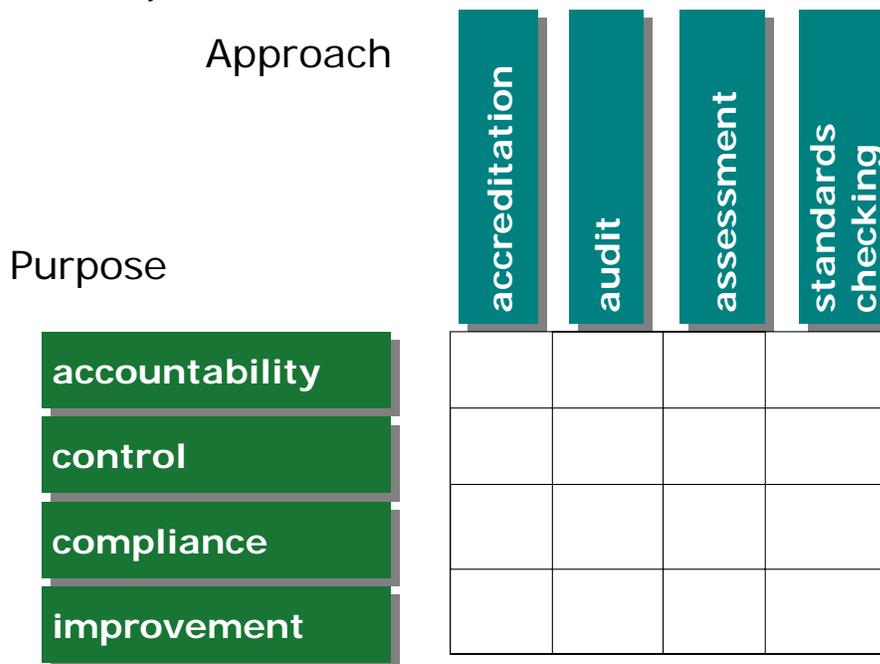
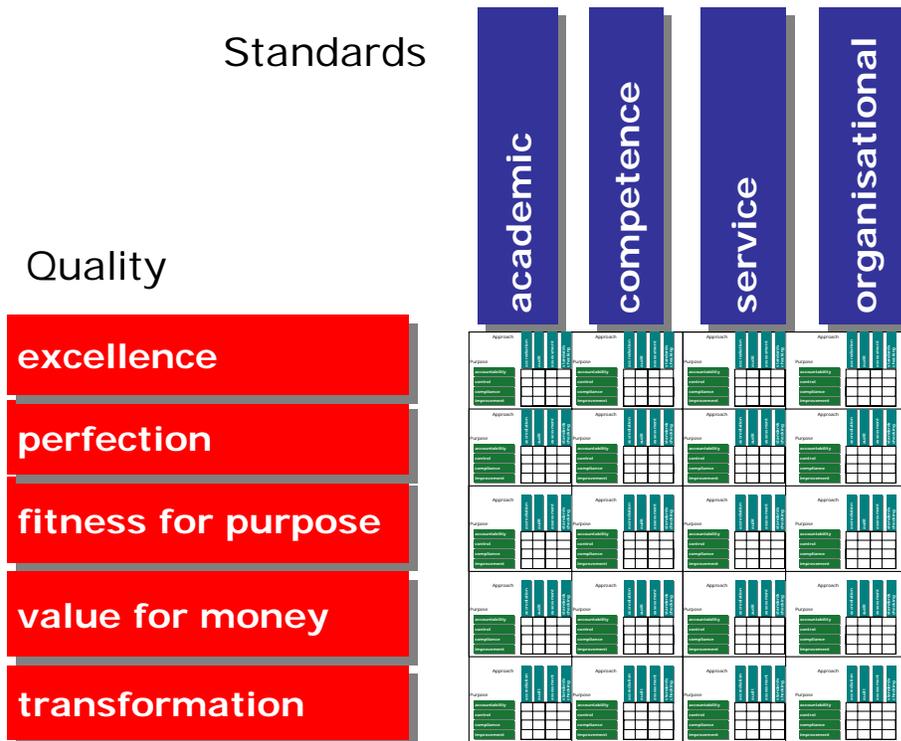


Figure 3: Quality, standards, purposes and approaches



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The impact of quality assurance on the quality of degrees

After nearly twenty years of quality assurance, has it had any impact on the quality of degrees? Of course, in some places, quality assurance has been around for a lot longer than 20 years, albeit by other names, while in other countries anything approaching assurance of quality of higher education is very new. In the United States, regional accreditation has been in place since the start of the last century. Similarly, in the UK, professional accreditation of programs is long established in some areas such as medicine and is, in such cases, encapsulated in regulatory legislation. In addition, the external examiner scheme has been in place since the university system in the UK began to expand more than a hundred years ago with the creation of the new civic universities. Other countries adopted an external examiner system well in advance of the “quality revolution” that gathered momentum in the late 1980s.

Although it is hard to disentangle pre-existing arrangements from more recent quality mechanisms and processes, the question remains to be answered as to what impact the quality assurance activity of the last twenty years has had. Impact is a difficult concept in itself. If it is meant to imply a simple cause-and-effect relationship, then it is difficult to say that any perceived change in the quality of degrees is attributable to a quality assurance cause. There is the direct impact of quality assurance processes, such as the generation of course documents, audit reports, and the like, but such document production does not necessarily and unambiguously translate into changes in degree of quality, although one could hope for improvements. The more indirect model of impact

required is sometimes referred to as the “permeable layer” approach. In this model, the activities of quality assurance agencies combined with internal developments in institutions, in both cases reflecting a broader market or governmental context, combine to change activities, perspectives, and attitudes that result in implementation of international, national, institutional, or departmental policies in ways unintended or unanticipated by those who generated the policy. A recent conference of representatives from quality assurance agencies agreed that there is no simple causal model of impact.

At best there are permeable layers, where actions of external agencies and people within institutions work, alongside other external and internal processes, to filter down to specific practices to change curricula, enhance learning. However, there is at best a suggestion that the external processes may be involved but little hope of showing a direct link. Furthermore, the implementation, for example, of recommendations is not a simple top-down process but one that involves an iterative process of top-down direction and bottom-up implementation. In addition, recommendations from quality evaluations are rarely written in a form, or with such detail, as to specify appropriate innovations that would directly impact on learning and teaching, or, indeed, research. (Harvey, 2007b, pp. 82–3)

A further complication when exploring impact on “quality of degree” is whether this refers to some abstract gold standard notion of what an ideal-type degree should be or whether it relates to the student learning experience. There are those who would argue that, despite quality assurance, a degree is not what it used to be. Indeed, when a tiny proportion of privileged people attended university, the degree was exclusive and quite different from today. Whether the exclusivity made it any better other than more marketable is a moot point. The suggestion is that when it was exclusive, the quality of an awarded degree was higher, implying that students did more in order to successfully achieve an award. This is highly contentious. Nonetheless, the claims of dumbing down correlated with grade inflation resulting in a higher proportion of first-class and upper-second-class degrees in the UK and similar phenomena in the US and elsewhere raise questions about comparable standards, as opposed to the quality of the degree.

A similar dilemma materializes if one focuses on the student learning experience. Over the last twenty years or more, the student experience has possibly declined because massification has meant less contact time with academic staff, a more fragmented experience of peers because of semesterized, modularized, cafeteria choice systems, and the need for students to spend increasing amounts of time working for money. There is also, apparently, more pressure on student support resources. On the other hand, teaching and learning techniques have improved considerably, although how much that has to do with quality assurance is debateable, and modern technology means that information is readily available and that contact does not need to be face-to-face. Furthermore, what is expected of students and what students can expect are more transparent than twenty years ago and cross-fertilization of ideas in a diverse and porous system is potentially greater.

Having said all this, and despite two decades of quality assurance, there is remarkably little substantive research on the impact of quality assurance in higher education. It is not clear, apart from the costs, why there is a paucity of other than anecdotal evidence.

Maybe approaches exploring impact are dominated by positivist approaches that focus on cause and effect, which have little success in making causal claims. An alternative phenomenological or dialectical approach is likely to bear more fruit, as for example, in the critical close-up studies of academics' engagement with quality issues (Newton, 2000). Space precludes a detailed analysis of the available research, and reference will be made to two recent analyses, one deriving from the quality assurance agencies themselves and another from a recent examination by Bjorn Stensaker at the European Universities Association Quality Forum.

In a recent conference under the auspices of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, the agency delegates maintained that, despite there being no simple causal link, there was a significant impact from external quality assurance, including on the teaching and learning situation (Harvey, 2006b). The agencies identified several aspects: external quality assurance placed a requirement on institutions to take responsibility for students enrolled, which was reflected in the growing concern over attrition; there have been demonstrable curriculum adjustments and the growth of course evaluations, appeals, and complaints procedures; in addition, agencies claim, standards have improved and there are plenty of examples of better ways of teaching.

Despite little concrete research on the impact of external quality on either learning or research,

there was some agreement that there were possible short-term (positive) impacts on learning through self-evaluation processes, which engender changes in practice. Further, student evaluations, as part of external processes, are not afraid to highlight issues around the teaching-learning interface. However, while there may be an initial response to these, as to weaknesses identified in self-evaluations, the impact may be short-term and dissipate in the interval between evaluations. (Harvey, 2007b, p. 84)

Quality assurance “legitimises the discussion of teaching”; it is no longer acceptable to regard teaching as a private domain. However, “in many settings, teaching and learning innovation operate quite independently of quality initiatives” (Harvey, 2007b, p. 84).

Stensaker (2007) took a somewhat different approach in suggesting that external quality assurance procedures have an impact on the higher education environment. He also noted that

In practice, it is nevertheless almost impossible to find one-dimensional and pure effects of quality processes. This is perhaps the main lesson we have learned after a couple of decades of studying quality processes. And as shown below, the impacts of quality can be interpreted quite differently depending on the point of departure. (Stensaker, 2007, p. 60)

He identified four areas of impact: power, professionalism, public relations, and permeability. On the first, he noted that

The trend is rather clear—quality processes support the development of a stronger institutional leadership in higher education (Askling 1997). This can be seen by the increasing centralisation of information quality systems produce, and the much clearer lines of responsibility that most institutions develop in this area. While this may be an effect that is welcomed by some, it is seen by others as a troublesome development where responsibilities the individual academic had in the past are removed (Henkel 2000). On the other side, we can also find evidence that quality processes triggers discussions and debates about the institutional identity of universities and colleges, forcing them to re-invent themselves as organisations and re-think their missions and profiles (Stensaker 2006). And while the individual academic may have lost some power in the process, one can also see a more legitimate role for students and other stakeholders developing (Harvey & Knight 1996), triggering effects not yet overseen for the sector. (Stensaker, 2007, p. 60)

Quality work, he noted, has become more professional, with “written routines, scripts, and rule-driven handbooks providing hints of when to do what, and the persons in charge.” Some just see this as increased bureaucracy while others regard it as making “tacit knowledge” transparent. What this divide tends to ignore is that quality processes “might also stimulate new forms of cooperation” between academics and between academics, student and administrators.

With the emergence of markets and concerns about globalization and competition, “quality processes are used as a marketing and branding tool.” Optimistically, Stensaker (2007, p. 61) argues that

at a time when the sector is under pressure ‘this is something that actually might improve the external understanding of higher education, not least by also prioritising and emphasising the teaching and learning outcomes of higher education, and not only the research and innovation aspects which tend to dominate the external image of higher education institutions (Dill & Soo 2004). In this way, quality processes are also of assistance as a way to defend the sector against the many poorly developed, unfair or unbalanced ranking and performance indicators systems which these days sweep over the world.

In what he refers to as permeability, Stensaker argues that quality assurance has led to a proliferation of information and that

we probably know more about higher education than ever before...[and] this has led to more informed decision-making processes where data and information about performance, relevance and quality are used more systematically (Brennan & Shah 2000)...In other words, quality processes are more and more intertwined with other organisational processes and are opening up the ‘black box’ of higher education. (Stensaker, 2007, p. 61)

So, quality assurance has had an impact. Whether it has enhanced the student experience of learning is still unclear because it is hard to disentangle the effects of quality assurance régimes from the other significant changes over the last twenty years. One view is that quality assurance has been an inevitable consequence of those changes rather than in any way leading them. An alternative suggests that without quality assurance the whole higher education edifice, once confronted with market forces, would have been in danger of crumbling. A third, rather cynical view is that there has been an overall deterioration in higher education as managerialism has run rife, and that quality assurance is a flimsy charade pretending that all is well.

The remainder of this paper will explore two issues related to quality assurance: challenges of measuring outcomes; credit transfer. It will close by addressing the issue of quality culture, referring *en passant* to the so-called “UK experiment” (Finnie and Usher, 2005).

Learning outcomes

Learning outcomes is something that the Bologna process has been working on for a decade. Some countries such as Britain moved to a leaning-outcomes approach some years ago while others are still addressing the issue. Learning outcomes are a manifestation of and intrinsic to, it is claimed, a shift from didactic, teacher-led approaches to student-centred learning. *Trends V* notes

Although new degree structures are still commonly perceived as the main Bologna goal, there is increasing awareness that the most significant legacy of the process will be a change of educational paradigm across the continent. Institutions are slowly moving away from a system of teacher-driven provision, and towards a student-centred concept of higher education. Thus the reforms are laying the foundations for a system adapted to respond to a growing variety of student needs. Institutions and their staff are still at the early stages of realising the potential of reforms for these purposes.

Understanding and integrating the use of a learning outcomes based approach remains a key medium-term challenge. When achieved, it will enable students to become the engaged subjects of their own learning process, and also contribute to improving many issues of progression between cycles, institutions, sectors, the labour market and countries. (Crosier *et al.* 2007, p. 8)

However, Crosier *et al.* (2007, p. 47) are somewhat frustrated by the slow pace of change and complain that the “tools developed to assist the Bologna process...are not always being exploited to their full potential” and that it is particularly “important for staff and students to think in terms of learning outcomes to ensure that curricula are re-considered in appropriate depth.” Further, they noted that

Although progress in implementing new Bologna degree structures is clear, student-centred learning was mentioned surprisingly infrequently

during the site visits as a guiding principle of curriculum reform. Paradoxically, however, this does not necessarily imply the absence of a move towards more student-centred learning, but rather that the shift in thinking may follow instead of precede a reform of structures.

Indeed it was found that in many cases, reforming degree structures and curricula has obliged reflection on student needs. Thus, even where institutions had by their own admission initially engaged “reluctantly” in reforms, many now perceive benefits in terms of greater flexibility and variety of course offer for students. (Crosier *et al.* 2007, p. 21)

They also raised an important issue of conceptualization and terminology which is, no doubt, pertinent to Canada and worth noting as processes develop across the country.

It is important to highlight, however, that the mention of much of the terminology of the Bologna process—whether qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes, or to a lesser extent diploma supplements and ECTS—often met rather blank reactions. In many cases, further exploration revealed that a considerable amount of the content of reform takes place but using different local terminology. Meanwhile, the opposite phenomenon may also arise, as “Bologna” terminology is applied locally in a manner which may not be immediately understood from outside the particular system. Implementation of what appears to be a single European process is thus altered by the variety of national contexts in which the reforms are taking place. An additional cause of this problem is no doubt that the “Bologna language” that is spreading across Europe is developed within an overly restricted circle of “European specialists”, with not enough attention being paid to the process of dissemination of ideas. As one of the purposes of common terminology is to increase understanding and transparency, this is a serious issue in looking at how institutions and systems relate to each other, and one which has perhaps been underestimated. (Crosier *et al.* 2007, p. 22)

There are innumerable Bologna papers, seminars, and conference reports related to learning outcomes. The latest major event was the Edinburgh Bologna Seminar on Learning Outcomes in February 2008. The reported conclusions opened with the statement that

The seminar endorsed the proposition that “learning outcomes are the basic building blocks of the Bologna package of educational reforms” and that this methodological approach is at the heart of the paradigm shift from teacher to student-centred learning. (Roberts, 2008. p. 1)

Another key conclusion referred to the danger of attempting to implement learning outcomes in a superficial manner in compliance with external pressure. Learning outcomes are linked to a change in approach and are not a cosmetic exercise. Making such a change is complex and multi-faceted. A learning-outcomes approach needs time to develop if it is to result in a better learning experience for Europe’s students. It also needs

to respect and reflect the “local priorities, diverse needs and national traditions of the Bologna countries” and argues that a high priority should be placed on training in “the writing and implementation of learning outcomes” (Roberts, 2008. p. 2).

In particular, it is important that there are processes in place across Europe to assist staff and students to cooperate in the systematic implementation of learning outcomes at institution, program, and module level. It is important that there is a constructive alignment of learning outcomes with learning, teaching, and assessment. The seminar also recommended that, to facilitate recognition and mobility, learning outcomes should be written at “threshold” rather than “average” or “modal” level. It was suggested that a special program should be created “to promote trans-national staff and student mobility to share good practice in the development and implementation of learning outcomes” thus reasserting one of the original objectives of the Bologna process.

The seminar also raised the issue of terminology noting a “lack of clarity and shared understanding” of key terms associated with the learning outcomes, for example, “competences,” “workload,” “notional learning effort” “which was likely to impede effective implementation.” There is a need to develop an agreed terminology “based on a shared understanding amongst staff, students and other stakeholders about what the key concepts mean” (Roberts, 2008. p. 2).

Both *Trends V* and the Edinburgh event, noted that learning outcomes does not sell itself to skeptics:

It is particularly important for institutions to work closely with employers, and their representative organisations, to spread knowledge of the new degree structures and their learning outcomes in different academic disciplines. There is otherwise a danger that the new degrees, particularly at the first cycle, will be misunderstood or mistrusted within the labour market. (Crosier *et al.* 2007, p. 78)

The recommendation from the seminar was that a longitudinal study could be commissioned that would “collect evidence from graduates and employers about its impact and effectiveness” (Roberts, 2008. p. 2).

It is clear that “learning outcomes” is the preferred way forward in Canada: the “Procedures and Standards for New Degree Program Quality Assessment” contained within the ministerial statement (CMEC 2007c) is testament to that. These procedures are reminiscent of parts of the *European Standards and Guidelines*, albeit only pertinent to new programs or institutions, rather more focused on standards of attainment than quality processes and rather less clear about who does the evaluations than the European counterparts. Saunders (2006, p. 35) in his promotion of value-added, notes:

Quality in PSE can be thought of as the improvement in learning outcomes and ultimately final outcomes (such as earnings, health, life satisfaction, civic engagement) associated with the PSE experience.

In developing a learning-outcomes approach we are emphasizing three things:

- the learning rather than the time spent learning
- learning rather than teaching
- the array of knowledge, skills, and attitudes (attributes) that are the constituents of learning

In this changed approach, the focus, arguably, should be on the learning experience rather than the probably futile attempts to measure and compare outcome standards. This suggests that the question “How do we measure what is being learned?” is redundant. It is inappropriate to try to measure learning outcomes as if they are some kind of “quantitative” entity; as though the outcome of learning is a thing of variable size. Instead, learning should be evaluated as a process of coming to understand. This is a difference between learning measured by what you know and learning evaluated by how you come to know. While the former is superficially important, in “real life” it is how one learns and continues learning that is most important.

Credit accumulation and transfer

Credit accumulation and transfer raise a number of quality issues. Five years ago, Knight (2003, p. 15) flagged up the relationship between recognition of qualifications and quality assurance

Probably the most fundamental issue at hand is the challenge of forging a closer relationship between the frameworks and processes for quality assurance/accreditation of programmes, the recognition of institutions, and the recognition of academic and professional qualifications. This will require major shifts in approaches to these respective processes and closer collaboration between a mixed group of actors and stakeholders. The growing emphasis and consequent implications from lifelong learning, academic mobility (including the movement of people, programmes, providers and projects), increased labour mobility, innovative learning and education methods, greater diversification of degrees/certification are pushing the internationalisation of QA and the convergence of QA and QR to the forefront of the education agenda.

Credit accumulation within an institution is a relatively unproblematic process because most institutions have procedures for internal transfer of students. However, once students move outside the institution, transfer of credit and its accumulation toward a degree becomes much more problematic. This is difficult within jurisdictions even where national or regional systems or norms of credit accumulation and transfer exist; it is increasingly difficult and complex when transfer is across borders.

In Canada, there is a desire to facilitate transfer, again driven by economic-utilitarian objectives, not least the mobility of labour.

The primary purpose for establishing credit transfer agreements among institutions of higher education is to increase opportunities for students to

access postsecondary education by facilitating student mobility between institutions and sectors.

...By ensuring that learners receive appropriate recognition for learning already achieved, efficiencies in both time and money can be gained by students, institutions, and governments. The ability for learners at all stages of their lives and careers to easily move into, between, and out of postsecondary education is a key component in building a postsecondary education system that makes lifelong learning a reality. (CMEC, 2007a, Preamble, p. 27)

The process of facilitating transfer in Canada seems to be at an embryonic stage, with much depending on bilateral agreements between institutions and, in some cases, between provinces, at least in the form of framework agreements.

Mobility is a key aim of the Bologna process in Europe, but credit transfer continues to be rather slow in emerging as a seamless process. In many respects, credit transfer is disengaged from quality assurance processes. In essence, mutual recognition of quality underpins credit transfer; it is a necessary condition, but appears far from being a sufficient condition to enable the transfer process.

In Europe, the Sorbonne declaration of 25 May 1998 emphasized the creation of the European area of higher education as a key way to promote citizens' mobility and employability and the Continent's overall development. The Bologna Declaration (JDEME, 1999) developed this by, inter alia, calling for the “establishment of a system of credits—such as in the ECTS system—as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.” The Declaration called for:

...Promotion of mobility by overcoming obstacles to the effective exercise of free movement with particular attention to

- for students, access to study and training opportunities and to related services
- for teachers, researchers and administrative staff, recognition and valorisation of periods spent in a European context researching, teaching and training, without prejudicing their statutory rights....

The Declaration emphasized the need for the

Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programmes of study, training and research.

Indeed, in the recent London Communiqué, facilitating mobility was reaffirmed as one of the main goals to be achieved with the creation of a European Higher Education Area:

Mobility of staff, students and graduates is one of the core elements of the Bologna Process, creating opportunities for personal growth, developing international cooperation between individuals and institutions, enhancing the quality of higher education and research, and giving substance to the European dimension. (London Communiqué, 2007)

However, ministers acknowledged that a lot of obstacles still existed and reaffirmed their willingness to work for decisive progress in overcoming them. The main challenges identified related to

- visas, residence, and work permits
- financial incentives (including portable student loans and grants)
- pension arrangements
- joint programs and flexible curricula
- recognition of qualifications

The first three are to do with the logistics of mobility rather than any quality issues per se. The issue of joint programs is a complicated one and in a nascent state, and this paper will not address that, although noting the joint doctoral program created in 1996 by France and Quebec, which recognizes doctoral training received at a foreign institution and enables doctoral students to study for three terms at a foreign university and earn a joint PhD (CMEC 2007a).

Recognition of qualifications has quality implications and is a multi-faceted issue that will be outlined below; it refers to recognition of complete qualifications for labour market purposes as well as for movement within higher education; for example, from bachelor's to master's courses or to doctoral programs and recognition of work completed toward a qualification for movement from institution to institution while undertaking a degree.

The implementation of the latter form of credit transfer has been skirted over in the ministerial statement. Two issues arise: first, equivalence of program content; second, total credit accumulation.

In the UK there was a system of credits (CATS) before the Bologna Process and a lot of effort went into creating a transfer system. In practice, students did not take advantage of the flexibility to move between institutions within the country as much as was anticipated. This may have been because the system never worked smoothly. Institutions, despite acknowledging the credit value of student work from other institutions would still argue that the course content was not equivalent and hence not transferable. Further, institutions would not accept credits that added up to more than 50% of the program, arguing that they would be awarding a qualification that was substantially not their own. In some cases the acceptable proportion was way less than 50%.

When the Bologna process took off and there was increased mobility across Europe although, again, less than some anticipated, the ECTS system was also regarded as flawed, with much the same intra-nation issues operating internationally. The issue is, as

the following extract from the Bologna official Web site reveals, the delegation to the local, institutional level of the decision-making process.

The purpose of recognition is to make it possible for learners to use their qualifications from one education system in another education system (or country) without losing the real value of those qualifications.

The main international legal text that aims to further the fair recognition of qualifications is the Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the European Region (Lisbon Recognition Convention).

Like any legal text, the Convention must be put into practice. The recognition of qualifications falls within the competence of each country. In most cases, this means that higher education institutions are responsible for the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of further study whereas professional bodies or employers are responsible for recognition for the purposes of the labour market.

Tools that facilitate the recognition of qualifications are the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) and the Diploma Supplement (DS) (Bologna Process, 2008a)

This is replicated in Canada. CMEC's strategy from 2002 is to build a pan-Canadian system of credit transfer through an initial focus on developing and enhancing strong provincial/territorial transfer systems (CMEC, 2007a). However, the first three principles embodied in the joint ministerial statement (CMEC, 2007a, Appendix) reinforce institutional determination:

1. Ministers recognize that all credit transfer agreements should be consistent with the academic integrity of programs and the right of postsecondary institutions to determine program design and delivery, to determine academic prerequisites, and to establish admission criteria and certification requirements of academic achievement. Ministers also recognize that the academic integrity and governance autonomy of the individual institutions and programs must be protected and preserved.
2. Postsecondary institutions within each province/territory should be committed to working with other postsecondary institutions, transfer agencies, and governments, as appropriate, to enhance and maintain credit transfer opportunities. Negotiations between institutions regarding equivalency of credit should recognize that the substance of learning experiences may be equivalent in terms of content and rigour, although the learning has occurred in a variety of ways.
3. Transfer students should be made aware that program-specific criteria and other factors, in addition to academic performance, may be used as admission criteria. That is, while possession of academic prerequisites

makes an applicant eligible for admission, it does not guarantee admission to a particular program.

As in the Bologna process, the suggested antidote to the lack of guarantee is the that students should have more information, viz. principles 4 and 5 are

4. The effectiveness of transfer agreements in optimizing student mobility requires that students, prior to beginning their studies at another institution, have knowledge of, and current information about, available credit transfer opportunities and limitations. Institutions should be committed to providing current and reliable information about transfer of credit policies and the procedures to be followed to obtain transfer credit in a routine manner.

5. Students and institutions should be satisfied that transfer decisions are considered in a consistent manner. Postsecondary institutions should develop and maintain clearly stated policies and procedures for consideration of transfer of credit. Students should be able to obtain an institution's rationale for a refusal, and institutions should have clear procedures for students to appeal such decisions.

The Pan-Canadian Consortium on Admissions & Transfer (PCCAT) facilitates this and Alberta, for example, has the *Online Alberta Transfer Guide* that provides learners with updated admissions and transfer information.

This is all very well in principle but it is probably not workable in practice. Prospective students are already faced with a plethora of information, and it is unrealistic to consider that they would have the foresight, time, or ability to explore transferability options when selecting a program of study. Furthermore, as transferability agreements are predominantly bilateral and often at a program level, there are innumerable and ever-changing transfer arrangements. In Quebec, for example, one university apparently has 94 Diploma of Collegial Studies–Bachelor's Degree Program (DEC-BAC) agreements (CMEC, 2007a).

The *Trends V* report on credit transfer with the EHEA comments:

The use of ECTS as both a credit accumulation and credit transfer system continues to become more widespread across Europe, with almost 75% of institutions reporting use of ECTS as a transfer system [up from 68% in 2003] and over 66% as an accumulation system [up from 50% in 2003]. Yet while a vast majority of institutions are now using ECTS, there remains much work to be done to ensure that they use it correctly. Incorrect or superficial use of ECTS is currently still widespread. Such usage hinders the re-structuring of curricula, and the development of flexible learning paths for students, while also making both mobility and recognition more difficult. Institutions have to take responsibility for driving the development of ECTS in a way which enables them to respond

effectively to the challenges of an open and truly European higher education area. (Crosier *et al.*, 2007, p. 8)

Some countries, such as the UK, Spain, Cyprus and Latvia, use their own credit accumulation system, and Greece and Russia have a majority of institutions reporting that no credit accumulation system is in place. Crosier *et al.* (2007, p. 36) are concerned that something at the heart of the reform process has these inconsistencies and that “The extent and quality of the use of ECTS has thus become a matter of key importance to Europe’s higher education institutions and students.”

The point here is that, although recognition of qualifications, is one of the 10 action lines² of the Bologna process, the implementation of ECTS is not seen as an independent issue to be resolved but as an element in an integrated approach to curriculum reform and recognition of learning outcomes along with the Diploma Supplement and Qualifications Framework. Space precludes detailed discussion of these elements, but the key point is that credit transfer is linked to learning outcomes and the specification of such outcomes and their appropriate locus within a framework of qualifications.

The *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada* (CMEC 2007c) endorses the notion of a Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework. It uses generic descriptors that reflect the Dublin Descriptors used in the Bologna process as well as in many quality assurance agencies belonging to the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education. This is eminently sensible in an international context. It is notable that the same approach to linking the framework to learning outcomes has been adopted, although only in the sense of providing a “broad framework for each degree level, leaving to each province/territory the development of more detailed qualifications frameworks for degree credentials offered in its jurisdiction” (CMEC 2007c, p. 2).

Overall, credit accumulation and transfer is an important element if mobility is a objective of the higher education system. Clearly, the more that institutions adopt a not-invented-here approach and require that every transfer is from a program with equivalent content then the process of transfer becomes tortuous. Focusing on learning outcomes makes this approach easier, as does a universal system that weights the contribution of

² According to the “The official Web site 2007-09 - From London to Benelux and beyond.” The ten action lines are: qualifications frameworks/three-cycle system; joint degrees; mobility; recognition; quality assurance; social dimension; employability; lifelong learning; EHEA in a global context; stocktaking (see http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/ActionLines/QF_three_cycle_system.htm). These are presented somewhat differently by the Europe Unit:

Established in the Bologna Declaration of 1999:

1. Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; 2. Adoption of a system essentially based on two cycles; 3. Establishment of a system of credits; 4. Promotion of mobility; 5. Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; 6. Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

Added after the Prague Ministerial summit of 2001:

7. Focus on lifelong learning; 8. Inclusion of higher education institutions and students; 9. Promotion of the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area

Added after the Berlin Ministerial summit of 2003:

10. Doctoral studies and the synergy between the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area (see http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/bologna_process/10_bologna_process_action_lines.cfm)

courses to a final award (an ECTS equivalent). A qualifications framework, in principle, facilitates the process further, although such frameworks are very difficult to create across borders and have the risk of being over-deterministic. In the last resort, a process of quality assurance that encourages mutual trust and acceptance between institutions within and across jurisdictions is necessary to underpin any transfer arrangements.

A lesson from the European setting that might be worth bearing in mind in Canada, is the need for patient persistence. Changes of culture take a long time. As Stephen Adam pointed out in his introduction to the Bologna Process seminar on recognition in Riga, 2007 (Crosier et al., 2007, p. 60):

When developments in qualifications frameworks, cycles, learning outcomes, quality assurance, credits, recognition and lifelong learning are put together something new and powerful will be created. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) will provide immense opportunities for countries and institutions providing they fully embrace the changes inherent within the new architecture for higher education that is emerging... However, it must be remembered that for most countries the difficult task of producing and implementing qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes is just commencing.

Quality culture

In undertaking quality assurance, it is important to constantly ask what purpose is being served? What are the appropriate approaches? Do the methods being used do the job required? What is it that the process should be assuring? What should we be focusing on? It is equally important to distinguish quality concepts from both quality assurance and standards. Further, avoid confounding quality standards (operational norms) with outcome standards (of achievement).

If the bottom line is the improvement or enhancement of provision and outcomes, then it is also important to see quality improvement as a holistic endeavour. Fragmenting elements of quality assurance, or approaching it by pre-determining methods in advance of a clear understanding of purpose, as was the case in the early years of European developments, inhibits rather than enables improvement.

The UK quality assurance approach is now probably the most sophisticated and integrated national system. It has taken years often of turmoil to become embedded and fully integrated. The characterization of the UK Quality Assurance experiment by (Finnie and Usher, 2005, p. 24) rather misses the point about the integrated approach and focuses on past contentious issues. Not all UK academics endorse external or even internal quality assurance, but the hostility described by Finnie and Usher is no longer apparent.

The approach in the UK attempts to integrate assurance within a broader academic infrastructure that has evolved from recommendations about quality and standards made in the Reports of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education and its Scottish Committee (Dearing and Garrick reports) in 1997. The Academic Infrastructure includes: a ten-part code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards

in higher education; frameworks for higher education qualifications in England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and in Scotland; subject benchmark statements; program specifications, and progress files. Space prohibits an analysis of all these elements (see QAA, 2008), but the key is the way the elements interlock to link evaluative processes with curriculum design, assessment regimes, award frameworks, and articulation of student achievement.

This infrastructure approach is, at heart, an attempt to embed a culture of quality designed to develop a student-centred approach and to continuously improve. It also attempts to provide the context in which internal processes are in a symbiotic relationship with external processes. In that respect, it has been relatively successful as many of the infrastructure elements have now become taken-for-granted, even if they were initially compliance responses to perceived bureaucratic requirements.

“Quality culture” is a new “buzzword” in Europe. The European Universities Association (EUA, 2004) sponsored a project that ran between 2002 and 2006. It was a spin-off from the Bologna process designed to increase awareness of the need to develop an internal quality culture and promote the introduction of *internal* quality management to improve quality levels and help universities make the most of external quality assurance processes.

A key to the whole integrated approach is ensuring that there are internal processes under local control and with delegated responsibility and accountability, and that they are fully integrated with external processes into an infrastructure. This is explicit in the UK and increasingly materializing within the Bologna Process as its action lines overlap.

Although not wanting to impose a single conception of quality culture, EUA did argue that any quality culture was based on two distinct elements. First, a set of shared values, beliefs, expectations, and commitment toward quality and, second, a structural or managerial element with well-defined processes that enhance quality and coordinate tasks, standards, and responsibilities (EUA 2006, p. 10).

However, there is ambiguity here because quality culture is, on the one hand, impossible to define since every higher education institution is unique (understanding “culture” as something an organisation is) while, on the other hand, it could be encompassed in structural or managerial efforts stimulating shared values and beliefs. One might also argue that quality culture is heavily political and, in the changing context, is a tool to encourage compliance. Quality culture is, thus, a complex concept and not easily pinned down to the establishment of a set of procedures or an institutional quality unit! Indeed, one might suggest a range of features of a quality culture, such as:

- academic ownership and engagement
- recognition of the need for a quality system (but not one driven by bureaucracy)
- a focus on changing people’s behaviour rather than the mechanics of a system of reporting and review
- clarity of purpose
- centrality of students: both the student learning experience as the focus of quality of education and the involvement of students in evaluative processes as credible evidence providers and peers in evaluation teams

- encouragement of partnership and cooperation
- focusing less on individual performance and more on enabling community engagement and team working
- a leadership style that inspires rather than dictates
- welcoming of external critical evaluation
- an integrated and continuous process of self-reflection
- providing the context to take the initiative to improve, even where it is risky

This normative list, however, doesn't capture the varied nature of quality cultures in practice. Harvey and Stensaker (2008) constructed a characterization of quality cultures based on two bifurcated dimensions: degree of group control within an academic setting, and intensity of external rules operating on that setting. The resultant two-by-two grid (Figure 4), suggests four ideal-type approaches to quality culture: responsive, reactive, regenerative, and reproductive.

Figure 4: Ideal types of quality culture

Degree of group-control Intensity of external rules	Strong	Weak
Strong	Responsive	Reactive
Weak	Regenerative	Reproductive

Source: Harvey and Stensaker 2008.

Responsive quality culture

The responsive mode is led by external demands and is positive in taking opportunities and using them to review practices and create forward-looking agendas. It is improvement-focused and tends to maximize benefit from engagement with policies or requirements. Responsive quality assurance attempts to learn from others. It tends to see quality culture as something created to deal with the evaluation problem. So, although opportunistic, there is often a lack of buy-in to a quality culture as a way of life and a lack of feeling of ownership or of any real control.

Reactive quality culture

The reactive mode is reward- or sanction-led and task-oriented. It is reluctant to embrace most forms of quality evaluation, having reservations about the potential outcomes. This mode doubts that quality evaluation will lead to improvement. It tends to be compliant and is often reluctant. It sees quality as a "beast to be fed" (Newton, 2000). The reactive mode tends to deal with quality issues in a fragmented way and has little or no sense of ownership of quality processes.

Regenerative quality culture

The regenerative mode is internally-oriented with strong belief in staff and existing procedures. It takes advantage of external opportunities inasmuch as they augment its internal agendas. Because of that, it is not always adaptive to external demands and

developments. A regenerative quality culture tends to be embedded in the department and widespread, with clear overall goals that are dynamic and improvement-oriented. It is experimental and risk-taking. The regenerative mode seeks out learning opportunities and benchmarking possibilities. The quality culture will be indistinguishable from everyday work practice and while it leads to regeneration it will be unquestioned. However, there is a latent subversive potential.

Reproductive quality culture

The reproductive mode aims to replicate the status quo, aiming to minimize the impact of external factors. It focuses on sub-units and emphasizes the expertise of the individual, and the culture reflects the expertise and individual aspirations of members. It is indistinguishable from everyday work practice but is not transparent and is encoded in various taken-for-granted or esoteric practices. Any attempt to develop a more open, self-critical approach is likely to result in an implacable resistance culture.

The four quality cultures outlined are ideal-types, but characteristics can be found in various higher education settings. This is an important point because studies have shown how quality assurance systems are often designed without taking into account existing social and professional structures and relationships. The argument in Harvey and Stensaker (2008) is that “localised” knowledge and practice should play a more important part in developing institutional quality assurance schemes and that, rather than see quality culture as an answer to challenges, it should be conceptualized as a means of *identifying* potential challenges.

Quality culture is not a panacea; it is not something that can be disengaged from a wider lived reality. A quality culture is an ideological construct, a fact that cannot be glossed by a set of prescriptions or recipes for implementation. A quality culture is owned by the people who live it, and thus the way they are construed will be crucial in determining the levels of engagement or resistance: if a quality culture is seen as a managerialist fad, as a means to reduce academic freedom, or as in any other way disempowering, then resistance will overshadow engagement.

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