



**Pan-Canadian Quality Assurance Symposium:
Challenges and Opportunities in Canadian Degree Quality Assurance
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INTRODUCTION

CMEC's Quality Assurance Subcommittee was established in 2004 to draft standards and procedures to assist provincial and territorial governments in assessing the acceptability of new degree programs and new degree-granting institutions. The ministers responsible for postsecondary education announced their endorsement of the *Ministerial Statement on Quality Assurance of Degree Education in Canada* in April 2007. Shortly thereafter, with support of PSADM, the subcommittee committed to hosting a pan-Canadian quality assurance symposium in spring 2008 to focus discussion on important issues facing quality assurance in Canada and abroad.

The symposium was held at the Château Laurier Québec from May 27 to May 28, 2008, and was preceded by a welcome reception hosted by the Ministère de l'Éducation, du Loisir et du Sport, on the evening of May 26. The first day featured a keynote address, three panel sessions consisting of speakers followed by questions and answers, and a World Café. The second day began with a summary of the previous day by a rapporteur and was followed by a breakout session and report back to the plenary group. The symposium was an invitation-only event. It attracted almost 100 representatives from various government bodies and stakeholder groups from across the country and provided an excellent forum to explore the challenges and opportunities facing quality assurance standards and procedures, both nationally and in a global context.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

The symposium opened on Tuesday, May 27, with a keynote address by Dr. Lee Harvey, Director of Research and Evaluation of the Higher Education Academy, UK. His presentation on *Placing Canadian Quality Assurance Initiatives in an International Context* discussed the diverse and changing approaches to quality, the difference between quality, quality assurance and standards, the main purposes of quality assurance, the impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning, and finally, the different types of quality culture. A brief discussion of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) provided a useful context for situating Canadian quality assurance initiatives in a global context.

Dr. Harvey's presentation was based on his paper of the same name, which is posted on the CMEC Web site.

PANELS

Panel I – The Challenge of Measuring Outcomes

While measuring outcomes has emerged as an essential component of quality assurance, those in the field struggle with this important notion. Panellists were tasked with trying to answer what makes this so challenging and were charged with trying to answer such questions as

- How does one measure whether a student has achieved the learning outcomes identified for a specific component of the educational experience?
- How can we associate cause and effect in terms of how these outcomes were achieved?
- When thinking of quality assurance itself, what distinguishes a learning experience or environment producing higher quality outcomes from others?
- How do policies and procedures aimed at quality assurance have a meaningful impact on the quality of degree programs, particularly when reviewing programs a priori?

Dr. Bernard Hodgson, Chair of the Program Proposal Evaluation Committee (CEP) of the Conférence des recteurs et des principaux des universités du Québec and full professor in the Department of Mathematics and Statistics at Université Laval, described the three stages of review for new degrees in Quebec: development of the proposal by the university; quality evaluation by the CEP; and assessment by ministries. The central question of the CEP, composed of eight professors appointed by vice-rectors who act as private individuals and not as representatives of their university, is whether the proposed program will provide quality education to the students who register for it. Dr. Hodgson also described the role that the Government of Quebec plays in asking whether society needs the new program. Program reviews consist of the following important pillars:

- Use of a list of experts who can be consulted (a minimum of three for each program review with at least one expert from outside Quebec)
- An expert report/recommendation provided to the CEP
- CEP providing an opinion to the proposing university
- An evaluation by the ministry, including an examination of the appropriateness of supporting the program with public funds

Participants heard that there is a good partnership between the government and universities – the CEP has been in place for 20 years, and the legitimacy of the CEP has been universally recognized and accepted by universities. It is rare that a CEP-approved/reviewed program is rejected by government.

An overview of the recently formed Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) was provided by Dr. Ken Norrie, its Vice President, Research, and former Provost and Vice-President (Academic) at McMaster University. He described HEQCO as an independent agency of the Government of Ontario that is working with institutions to identify what works. A key focus of Dr. Norrie's presentation involved acknowledging the gap between how students learn and how we teach, asking how we can know if degree expectations (as articulated, for example, in the Ontario qualifications framework) are met, and how we should evaluate the effectiveness of various quality assurance systems. A current premise in higher education is that student engagement is highly and significantly correlated with final learning outcomes. We need to be able to measure the value added directly from various learning assessment tools.

Panel II – Linking Credit Transfer and Quality Assurance

As students become more mobile, return to postsecondary education later in life, or choose to start their education at an institution close to home, they need greater access to options and programs at different types of postsecondary institutions. Three panellists discussed how quality assurance may play a role in fostering collegial relationships between institutions and in developing policies and procedures to ensure transferring students receive appropriate consideration for credits already obtained.

Dr. Frank Gelin, Executive Director and Co-Chair of the British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer (BCCAT), provided an overview of the BC transfer system, including BCCAT's quality assurance transfer policy, the admissions and transfer criteria of BC's Degree Quality Assessment Board, and the contract letter of assurance required from private institutions. He acknowledged that movement on the transfer front occurred only after people started to consider the needs of students.

Mr. Ron Woodward, Chair of the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT) and President of Red Deer College, highlighted learners' expectations regarding opportunities for mobility in all directions, which is challenging the traditional view of transfer. He provided an overview of ACAT and described Alberta's diverse and changing postsecondary system and the numerous and varied career progression opportunities available to students. Alberta's transfer system has emerging needs, including more mobile learners who expect greater transfer opportunities and an increase in non-traditional transfer. How can our quality mechanisms ensure efficient transfer, asked Mr. Woodward, and how can our progression model ensure quality opportunities? In order to address the issues of ensuring quality and efficient transfer opportunities facilitating learner mobility throughout the system, ACAT is collaborating with its partners (institutions, Advanced Education and Technology, and the Campus Alberta Quality Council) to develop a research project on "Learner Progression Best Practices."

Closing out the panel, Dr. Sheila Embleton, Vice President Academic at York University, described the Ontario context in regard to quality assurance for university

undergraduate programs, including the work of the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC), which provides provincial oversight. Dr. Embleton outlined the issues to be considered in program reviews, as well as the university undergraduate-degree-level expectations. She ended her presentation by enumerating trends in international education in Ontario and presenting participants with a challenge: in terms of international mobility, how do we develop a more equitable assessment of international applicants to graduate schools? This is particularly relevant for programs that focus on more depth of study, although perhaps foregoing breadth of study, than Canadian or American undergraduate programs.

Panel III – Quality Assurance for Distance Education and E-Learning

As new computer and telecommunications technologies offer increasing choices for distance education and e-learning programs, quality assurance has become increasingly important. The last panel of the symposium's first day discussed current and innovative developments and practices for addressing this issue.

Dr. Stephen Murgatroyd, Chief Scout with the Innovation Expedition and formerly the first executive director of Athabasca University's Centre for Innovative Management (home of the world's first on-line executive MBA), focussed his presentation on innovation, quality, and change. Speaking on the theme of 'quality nimbleness' and innovation, Dr. Murgatroyd began by delineating some of the current realities: blended learning is normal; e-learning is the emerging standard; mobile learning is growing quickly; there is a significant growth of simulation and serious gaming; courses are being developed based on "authentic tasks"; and communities of practice are developing. He then posed six provocative challenges for quality assurance: (1) Who is quality assurance for? (2) Shouldn't we be focusing more on the experience of learning, since most quality assurance concerns teaching? (3) Why should we use classroom teaching as the basis for quality assurance, as opposed to models of effective learning? (4) Will quality assurance inhibit the effective use of technology to support learning? (5) Why permit quality assurance panels to judge e-learning and the potential of technology, since they know little about this? (6) Since students know more about learning technologies than many of us, why aren't students actively participating in the judgments being made about new programs and institutions?

Dr. Ron Bond, Chair of the Campus Alberta Quality Council and Provost Emeritus at the University of Calgary, summarized the council's quality assessment standards for programs delivered at a distance and then discussed council's practice in assessing distance education programs. Like the previous presenter, he ended by asking six key questions: (1) Should stand-alone or supplemental standards be developed by quality assurance agencies? (2) To what extent should an up-to-date technological "infrastructure" be assessed? (3) How do institutions and agencies address the special challenges of assuring the quality of trans-border distance-delivered programs? (4) Will quality assurance policies and standards keep pace with changing technologies? (5) How can we better assess the quality of learning outcomes, whatever the delivery

methods used? (6) When should standards be applied, and what is the place of hybrid programs?

Dr. Raymond Duchesne, director of teaching and research at the Télé-université du Québec, who was originally scheduled to participate as a panellist but had to withdraw due to unforeseen circumstances, was replaced by Dr. Louis Mather, Academic Dean at Télé-université du Québec, who closed the formal panel. Télé-université is the distance university of the Université du Québec à Montréal. Dr. Mather stated that distance learning primarily affects part-time adult students. Evaluation of distance learning for all universities uses the same process as for non-distance programs, and as a Proposal Evaluation Committee policy, programs need to be evaluated every 10 years.

The panel presenters addressed a number of important topics and raised several strategic questions. The difficult challenge of drawing common themes emanating from the keynote address as well as eight panel presentations was left to Dr. Keith Banting on the morning of the symposium's second day.

WORLD CAFÉ

The World Café, which took place just after the lunch hour on day one of the symposium, afforded attendees the opportunity to attend several short presentations by fellow symposium participants and provided a chance to network and share best practices. Participants had the opportunity to choose from the following engaging topics:

- Hallmarks of good practice in carrying out quality assurance at the institutional level
- Challenges posed by diploma mills
- The next developments in e-learning
- Programs to support successful studies at the University of Moncton
- Distance education quality standard
- Assessment of past actions and future perspectives of quality assurance and accreditation in the universities of Quebec
- Credit transfer between public and private institutions
- The development of a network of quality assurance practitioners
- Religious degrees
- Ontario's qualifications framework

Several of these topics were presented in French and English, and one of the sessions was presented entirely in French. Feedback from participants following the symposium indicated a high level of satisfaction with the quality and relevance of the World Café, and some said even more time should have been allotted.

RAPPORTEUR, BREAKOUT SESSIONS AND REPORTING BACK

The symposium's final day began with a report from Dr. Keith Banting, Queen's Chair in Public Policy and professor at Queen's University, who acted as rapporteur for the symposium. He identified three themes that ran through the symposium: what is our purpose; how are we doing; and what are the results. He also identified one issue that appeared several times throughout the symposium: how to engage academics in the quality assurance process. Dr. Banting observed that without the kind of information we require/would like to have, we are still left with only faith that what we are doing is right. He concluded by identifying three challenges: how to shift purposes to continuous improvements; how to shift to learning outcomes; and how to get the right balance between assurance and innovation.

Dr. Banting's report served as an introduction to the feedback portion of the symposium. The plenary group was split into nine breakout groups and offered the opportunity to provide feedback on four questions. Following the breakout session, Dr. Banting facilitated the reporting back to the plenary group. The following were the key messages highlighted in the reports (organized by question):

1. How does one balance protecting the interest of learners through quality assurance without stifling innovation?
 - This may be a bit of a false dichotomy; quality assurance can actually provide the basis for innovation. Quality assurance might be better conceptualized as external vs. internal quality assurance.
 - There is a tension between new providers/new program delivery and quality assurance, and a tension between a program being innovative but not being in the economic plan of a province.
 - Quality assurance bodies need innovation as part of their mandate – almost none of them have it.
 - Is every innovation beneficial to students? How much risk are we willing to take, and how might we mitigate the risk for students?
 - Innovation could be stifled if on-line and distance education isn't handled carefully.
 - There should be a strong emphasis on the active participation of students, both in the quality assurance processes as well as at the institutional level. A student-centred approach will likely lead to quality assurance processes that are less problematic for innovation.
 - Quality assurance processes may lead to homogenization; diversity and choice are useful things for students.
 - Quality assurance needs to allow for or have a framework for institutions to encourage innovation.
 - Quality assurance needs to be evolutionary, flexible, and nimble.
 - The best process is an outcomes-based process.

2. In what ways can quality assurance facilitate credit transfer?

- We need to move toward an outcomes based approach – focusing on what a student is capable of rather than the specific content. This is what will facilitate credit transfer and therefore a common language.
- There should be a focus on common scales and measures.
- Credit transfers need to be based on trust and a transparent process. There should also be a focus on initiatives that will build trust among institutions. Credit transfer has to arise out of institutions themselves. Most disputes are around confidence in the institution, not the course.
- It is dependent on bringing everyone up to the same level, as some jurisdictions have credit transfer system in place and some are just getting started.
- Quality assurance systems in themselves have not necessarily been proven to promote credit transfer.
- A good quality assurance process is the basis of credit transfer.
- There needs to be a reasonable expectation around credit transfer. Is it possible and desirable to have every credit recognized?
- Program standardization and a common understanding of learning or vocational outcomes, through the Ontario qualifications framework, has been a major factor in improving credit transfer in Ontario, especially for college-level programs.
- Quality assurance bodies have had an impact on building trust and facilitating credit transfer for students coming out of college baccalaureate and applied degree programs.
- Local expertise is likely to remain an important component in determining the acceptability of a program.
- We get too hung up on the minutiae of credit transfer – we need to look more at block transfer.

3. What kinds of benchmarks are required in order to facilitate credit transfer?

- “Indicators” would be a better term than benchmarks. We don’t know if benchmarks would be included as part of indicators.
- Degree qualification frameworks are a good foundation for credit transfer. The diploma supplement (of the Lisbon declaration) is interesting.
- Common benchmarks will help ladder certificate and diploma programs into degree programs.
- Sharing best practices among jurisdictions and institutions is important.
- Universities need to understand comparable programs at other institutions; they could demonstrate this as part of the academic review process.
- It would be nice to move to outcomes-based assessment, but there is not a lot of optimism. It is harder to measure things that matter more, like emotional intelligence.

- A central question is: How do we know whether learning outcomes have been achieved?
 - A student-centred approach, with clear and transparent benchmarks that are widely understood by students, is important.
 - We need to develop other intra- and interprovincial mechanisms to support the dissemination of data on credit transfer. This will improve counselling and support to students to ensure they understand what's possible in terms of credit transfer.
 - Some transfers can be managed by using challenge exams, but these are very labour intensive, so it probably is not feasible in general.
 - There's a responsibility on the part of institutions to ensure students have access to their historical record. There needs to be a better way of keeping complete historical program data.
 - We need to remember that "equivalent" is not necessarily the same as "identical."
 - How do we bring prior learning and assessment (PLAR) into the process?
4. If one were to envision degree quality assurance and recognition 10 years from now, what new or existing issues might be in the forefront? What issues are concerns now that may be resolved or turn out to be less problematic than anticipated?
- We will be working toward the same long-term goals but we'll be further along.
 - We will have more informed and savvy students.
 - There will be greater demands for PLAR and greater demands from institutions.
 - There will be a huge demand for international credit recognition. International degrees will increasingly come into focus and assessment of internationally educated students will remain a challenge.
 - We need a national research repository to share policy research informed by international practices,
 - We need to move toward pan-Canadian solutions – Canada needs a common voice so we can be a major player internationally.
 - There will be an increase of private institutions and the opening of international institutions within Canada. There will be more religious institutions, and some will be more fundamentalist.
 - If every province has a qualifications framework, this could become part of a diploma supplement in the future.
 - Students may amass a portfolio rather than a credential in the future, but employers are highly dependent on credentials, so this might not necessarily come about.
 - We will see a growing demand for work-based learning.

- The growing demand for access by under-represented groups in our education systems will create a new demand for a different kind of quality assurance. Quality assurance will get more difficult as a result, so we need to get smart in how we do this.
- There is likely to be more separation of undergraduate and graduate teaching.
- Quality assurance to date has not adequately addressed research and its growing emphasis in postsecondary education. We need to look at the incentive structure for faculty to encourage the importance of teaching.
- We need to better understand student mobility.
- We could end up with two types of universities – the traditional elite universities and other open universities.
- Library holdings will be off the table as currently defined, as we are moving into information literacy.
- The peer review concept is anchored in a time of 30 years ago – will peer review change in light of technology?
- There will be increasing variability of institutions and a growing partnership of institutions including international institutions.
- The branding process for postsecondary education will be a particular benefit.
- Given a global environment, multidisciplinary approaches will likely become the model for the future for many programs.
- Will we react to demographic challenges by watering down or tightening up standards?

CONCLUSION

The symposium included a formal feedback mechanism whereby participants were asked to evaluate the symposium in terms of their expectations, the quality and relevance of the presentations, the aspects of the symposium they found most and least effective, and the identification of what the subcommittee should do next to raise awareness or continue to dialogue about the key issues related to quality assurance. Generally, participants found the sessions relevant and were pleased with the quality of the presentations. Particularly good reviews were provided for the first panel discussion on the challenge of measuring outcomes, the World Café presentations, and the rapporteur's summation of the first day. A number of people specifically identified their appreciation for the synthesis provided by the rapporteur. Several people noted their appreciation for the informality and interactivity of the World Café segment. There was a general consensus that CMEC needs to continue with periodic updates through future forums similar to this initial symposium.