

## Introduction

Quality assurance is a shared responsibility between the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (the Quality Council – see Appendix 1) and Ontario’s publicly assisted universities. This collaboration ensures a culture of continuous improvement and support for a vision of a student-centred education based on clearly articulated program learning outcomes. Quality assurance processes result in an educational system that is open, accountable, and transparent.

### Quality Assurance: Context

Quality assurance of university academic programs has been adopted around the world and is widely recognized as a vital component of every reputable educational system. Considerable international experimentation in the development of quality assurance processes, along with increasing pressure for greater public accountability, has raised the bar for articulating Degree Level Expectations and learning outcomes in postsecondary education.

In 2009, Ontario universities created a task force to update their system for quality assurance that reflected the latest international standards. This resulted in the approval of the Quality Assurance Framework in 2010, which included the creation of an arm’s length, oversight body – the Quality Council. Ontario universities continue to show significant leadership and a firm commitment to cultivating a culture of quality in education. This is attested to by the long history and priority for rigorous quality assurance in Ontario universities that preceded the Quality Assurance Framework (insert QA web site link on the History).

### Quality Assurance: Today

Recommendations resulting from a [2018 External Expert Review Panel](#) (the Review Panel) have informed an evolution of the 2010 Quality Assurance Framework. In its Report, the Review Panel acknowledged “the desire [of Ontario universities] to expand the focus of quality assurance beyond that of the institutions demonstrating compliance with the established standards of quality to that of encouraging investments in quality improvement”. The Panel further recommended that the Quality Assurance Framework should continue to reflect international trends in higher education quality, focusing on the primary agents for assuring quality, institutions, and on the confidence that can be placed in their operation.

The Review Panel suggested that the next iteration of the Quality Assurance Framework should reflect an evolution from the 2010 Framework, in light of the fact that there already exists an excellent basis for this next stage. More particularly, the Panel recommended that the Quality Assurance Framework include two parts: Principles and Procedures (or Protocols). This principled approach to quality assurance would allow for a wider scope for interpretation and application and also provide recognition of the wider diversity in institutional strategies, special missions and mandates (for example, bilingualism) and student populations that is being encouraged by governments, institutions and others. By bringing Ontario’s universities quality

assurance practices into line with the latest international quality assurance standards, the Quality Assurance Framework also facilitates greater international acceptance of institutes' degrees and improves graduates' access to university programs and employment worldwide. With this latest iteration of the Framework, Ontario universities continue to be placed in the mainstream of quality assurance both nationally and internationally.

Accordingly, the 2019 Quality Assurance Framework includes the **Principles** that guide and inform every aspect of quality assurance, and a more detailed **set of Protocols** that are a prudent set of rules of best practice.

Care has been taken in evolving the Quality Assurance Framework for Ontario universities to balance the need for accountability with the need to encourage innovative curricular design. In particular, if quality assurance measures become too onerous or restrictive, they can become impediments rather than facilitators of continuous program improvements. Ontario universities and the Quality Council have kept this issue in mind in order to produce a Quality Assurance Framework that supports innovation and learning improvement while enabling transparency and accountability – i.e. quality *assurance* that produces quality *enhancement*.

# **Part One: Quality Assurance Principles for Ontario Universities and the Quality Council**

## **Principles**

As part of their ongoing commitment to a robust system of quality assurance that reflects international standards Ontario's publicly assisted universities (institutions) renew their commitment to quality assurance with the 2019 Quality Assurance Framework. In particular, all Ontario universities and the Quality Council commit to the principles articulated below.

### **Experience of the Student**

**Principle 1:** The best interest of students is at the core of quality assurance activities. Quality assurance is ultimately about the centrality of the student experience in Ontario. It is about student achievement in programs that lead to a degree or diploma; about ensuring the value of the university degree in Ontario, and of ensuring that our highly qualified graduates continue to be strong and innovative contributors to the well-being of Ontario's economy and society.

### **Oversight by an Independent Body**

**Principle 2:** While primary responsibility for quality assurance in all undergraduate and graduate programs offered by Ontario Universities rests with the institutions themselves, the universities have vested in the Quality Council final authority for decisions concerning all aspects of quality assurance.

**Principle 3:** The Quality Council operates at arm's length from both the institutions and the government to ensure its independence of action and decision.

**Principle 4:** With this responsibility to grant and withhold approval comes the Quality Council's recourse to substantial sanctions and remediation for use when necessary and as a last resort.

**Principle 5:** The Quality Council will have due and iterative processes in consultations with institutions, and have robust appeal processes.

**Principle 6:** The Quality Council itself will undergo a regular periodic quality assessment review by a review committee that includes, equally, reviewers who are external to the system and to the province, and reviewers who are internal to the system and to the province. This review will take place at least every eight years.

### **Autonomy of Universities**

**Principle 7:** The Quality Council acknowledges and respects the autonomy of the institutions and the role of senates and other internal bodies in ensuring the quality of academic programs as well as determining priorities for funding, space, and faculty allocation.

**Principle 8:** The institutions have vested in the Quality Council the final authority for decisions concerning ratification of **Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAPS)**, approval of new programs and compliance with the Audit Protocols. As the primary agents for quality assurance, all institutions have designed and implemented their own IQAP that is consistent not just with their own mission statements and their university Degree Level Expectations, but also demonstrably embodies the principles and procedures articulated in this Quality Assurance Framework.

## **Transparency**

**Principle 9:** The Quality Council operates in accordance with publicly communicated principles, policies and procedures. Both the Quality Council's assessment process and the internal quality assurance process of individual institutions is open, transparent, and accountable, except as limited by constraints of laws and regulations for the protection of individuals.

## **Increased Responsibility for Quality Assurance**

**Principle 10:** The Quality Council facilitates efficient institutional procedures, appreciating that processes for ensuring quality will be different from one institution to another, but requiring that all must comply with the broad processes identified in the Quality Assurance Framework.

**Principle 11:** The over-riding approach of the Quality Council is education, guidance, persuasion and negotiation. In this regard, the Council recognizes that institutional capacity for quality assurance differs between institutions and so resources of the system will be directed to those institutions that continue to face challenges.

**Principle 12:** The Quality Council recognizes past performance of institutions and adjusts oversight accordingly.

## **Continuous Monitoring and Quality Improvement**

**Principle 13:** Quality is not static, and continuous program improvement should be a driver of quality assurance and be measurable. An important goal for quality assurance is to reach beyond merely demonstrating quality at a moment in time and to demonstrate ongoing and continuous quality improvement. The Quality Council is committed to sharing effective best practices in quality assurance to assist institutions in their quality improvement work.

## **Expert Independent Peer Review**

**Principle 14:** Whether for new programs or cyclical review of existing programs, expert independent peer review is foundational to quality assurance.

## **Appropriate Standards**

**Principle 15:** The Quality Council's standards are appropriate to the nature and level of degree programs, are flexible and respectful of institutions and international standards, and encourage

innovation and creativity in degree programming. In applying these standards, documentation should be significantly relevant to decision-making, and not be burdensome.

## **Responsibilities of the Quality Council**

The Quality Council was established by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) to oversee quality assurance processes for all levels of programs in its publicly assisted universities, as of March 1, 2010. The universities have vested in the Quality Council final authority for decisions concerning all aspects of quality assurance.

### **Nature of Its Expert and Independent Judgments**

There are three levels of assessment for quality assurance: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary assessment occurs at the unit level where the program itself engages in the development of new programs and self-reflection and self-study of existing programs, calling upon those who participate to assess their contribution and experience (faculty, students, staff, and graduates).

Secondary assessment involves the authorities to whom the program reports, who engage in the assessment as well, calling upon independent experts to assess the evidence — this is expert or peer review. That review must be at arm's length from the unit and done by qualified persons. Secondary assessment also includes quality assurance at the institutional level. The results of this secondary assessment must be communicated to the program, responded to, and acted upon. The second-level oversight must provide assurance that the primary assessment steps have been appropriately carried out.

The Quality Council engages in tertiary assessment; it does not conduct primary or secondary assessments. Those are up to the institution. Rather, the Quality Council provides assurance to the system that the processes are sound; to the institution itself, other institutions, potential students, students, employers, and funders both public and private. It is a vehicle of public accountability to those who have an interest in the experience of those who enter, undertake and graduate from the program.

In order to best perform tertiary assessment, it is important that the Quality Council's membership include those with experience in primary and secondary assessment. It is not that they re-do the earlier assessments; rather, they are able to ascertain whether those assessments were comprehensively well done (that the main issues are addressed) and independently assessed (that the appraisers are arm's-length and knowledgeable). Well done also means well received. Not that the conclusions and recommendations are always welcomed; but that each has been reasonably considered and an appropriate plan has been developed to effect program improvement. What is praised is continued and strengthened; what is in need of improvement is in fact improved.

The Quality Council typically approves new programs and monitors their implementation and subsequent reviews; assesses significant changes, and audits the quality assurance

mechanisms within institutions. Since this activity is always tertiary appraisal, it is fundamentally an audit function. Audits result in forms of approval or disapproval: either permission to commence (in the case of new programs) or to continue, sometimes with conditions (a clean slate is the desired outcome for an institution).

### **Remedies Available**

When the Quality Council is not convinced of the quality of an institution's recommendations, appraisals, and/or monitoring, **then at the program level**, the Quality Council has the authority to:

- Not approve the commencement of a new program, or to suspend admissions into an existing program

**At the Institutional level**, where there may be concerns on policies and practices that arise through an audit, the Quality Council has the authority to:

- Require a report on steps taken where the deficiencies are minimal
- If more serious, issue directives with a response within a short timeframe about steps to be taken, followed by a report on completion of those steps
- Where these measures are not satisfactory, provide or forward a report to the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) and the Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) and initiate rolling and/or accelerated audits of all institutional internal quality assurance processes
- Finally, if these measures fail, then decline to approve, or suspend enrolment in, particular programs where processes are deficient, and/or suspending the institution's ability to create new programs

## **Responsibilities of Institutions**

Every publicly assisted Ontario university that grants degrees and diplomas is responsible for ensuring the quality of all of its programs of study, including modes of delivering programs and those academic and student services that affect the quality of the respective programs under review, whether or not the program is eligible for government funding.

Institutional responsibility for quality assurance extends to new and continuing undergraduate and graduate degree/diploma programs whether offered in full, in part, or conjointly by any institutions federated and affiliated with the university. These responsibilities also extend to programs offered in partnership, collaboration or other such arrangement with other postsecondary institutions including colleges, universities, or institutes. For definitions of the inter-institutional arrangements see the Definitions (Appendix 1 of Part Two: Protocols for Ontario's Universities).

The first responsibility of the institution is to develop and maintain an Institutional Quality Assurance Plan (IQAP) that sets out the institution's protocols for each of the elements of quality assurance (new programs, major modifications, expedited approvals and audits).

The Institutional Quality Assurance Processes (IQAP) must identify the authority or authorities responsible for the IQAP and its application, as well as the authoritative contact between the institution and the Quality Council. This will be the sole contact for communication between the institution and the Quality Council about the approval process.

For each protocol addressed in the IQAP, the institution will prepare and systematically maintain a set of institutional guidelines that describes the quality assurance activities associated with each. Among other items, this guidance should do the following:

- a) Provide guidance on the steps associated with creating a new program, cyclical program review, expedited protocol, or major modification
- b) Establish the criteria for the nomination and selection of arm's length external peer reviewers and the instruction to the Reviewers
- c) Identify responsibilities for the collection, aggregation and distribution of institutional data and outcome measures, as required
- d) Specify the format required for the new program proposal, self-study, expedited submission or major modification, and, where required, external reviewers' reports, including associated templates
- e) Set out the institution's cycle for the conduct of undergraduate and graduate program reviews

## **Amendments to the Quality Assurance Framework**

Changes to the Quality Assurance Framework Part One: Quality Assurance Principles for Ontario Universities and Quality Council are subject to approval of both the Quality Council and OCAV. It is understood that the principles are foundational to the approach to quality assurance; thus, amendments ought not to be required or considered until the next review of the Quality Assurance Framework. There may, however, be occasions where an amendment is necessary or desirable in which case either the Quality Council or OCAV may propose changes that may be made only with the approval of both bodies.

For the Quality Assurance Framework Part Two: Protocols for Ontario Universities, changes may be made at any time by the Quality Council and reported subsequently to OCAV.

## **Review of the Quality Assurance Framework and Quality Council**

The Quality Assurance Framework and the Quality Council will be reviewed periodically and independently using a methodology agreed to by the Quality Council and OCAV. An initial review of the new Quality Assurance Framework (as revised in 2019) and the Quality Council will take place after five years. Subsequent reviews will occur at least every eight years.

## Appendix 1

### The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance

#### Mission

The Quality Council is the provincial body responsible for assuring the quality of all programs leading to degrees and graduate diplomas granted by Ontario's publicly assisted universities and the integrity of the universities' quality assurance processes. Through these practices, the Quality Council also assists institutions to improve and enhance their programs. In fulfilling its mission, the Quality Council operates in a fair, accountable and transparent manner with clear and openly accessible guidelines and decision-making processes, and through reasoned results and evidenced-based decisions.

#### Mandate

The roles and responsibilities of the Quality Council, while respecting the autonomy and diversity of the individual institutions, are the following:

- to guide Ontario's publicly assisted universities in the ongoing quality assurance of their academic programs;
- to review and approve proposals for new graduate and undergraduate programs;
- to ensure through regular audits that Ontario's publicly assisted universities comply with quality assurance guidelines, policies and regulations for graduate and undergraduate programs;
- to communicate final decisions to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities;
- to review and revise, from time to time for future application, the Council of Ontario University's quality assurance protocols in light of its own experiences and developments in the field of quality assurance;
- to liaise with other quality assurance agencies, both provincially and elsewhere; and
- to undergo regular independent review at intervals of no longer than eight years.

#### Membership of the Quality Council

There are nine voting members of the Quality Council as follows:

- One member, who shall serve as Chair, external to OCAV but chosen by OCAV<sup>1</sup>
- Two OCAV members, one from a medical/doctoral university and one from a non-medical/doctoral university
- One Graduate Dean<sup>2</sup> or equivalent from a COU member institution
- One Dean of a Faculty from a COU member institution



- Two representatives from COU member institutions not otherwise represented on the Quality Council.,
- One member from outside Ontario with significant experience involving a post-secondary quality assurance organization
- One citizen member appointed by the COU through its Executive Committee
- The Senior Director Academic, Quality Assurance is *ex officio* and non-voting
- The Chairs of the Appraisal and Audit Committees are *ex officio* and non-voting

At least one member of the Quality Council will be bilingual and no two members can be from the same institution.

Except as provided above, all members of the Council will be appointed by OCAV, on the advice of the Secretariat, following an open nominations process. Members will be appointed for three year terms, normally renewable once.

### **Appraisal and Audit Committees**

The quality assurance process will be undertaken by an Appraisal Committee and an Audit Committee with responsibility for making recommendations to the Quality Council on the approval of new programs and on the audits of existing programs.

Members of these committees shall be senior academics with experience in the development, delivery and quality assessment of both graduate and undergraduate programs and shall not be members of the Quality Council. At least two members of each committee will be bilingual. The Senior Director Academic will be an *ex officio* member of these committees and the Secretariat will convene meetings and maintain records.

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<sup>1</sup> Candidate pools may include former OCAV members, former Deans or Vice-Provosts with experience in QA, former Executive Heads and other with significant experience in QA at the university level

<sup>2</sup> 'Graduate' dean means those individuals who have principal responsibilities for the overall direction of graduate programs at their institution

<sup>3</sup> Dean of a Faculty means those individuals who have overall responsibility for undergraduate programming within a Faculty, or – as may be the case – across the institution