

Terms of Reference for the Second Review of the Quality Assurance Framework and the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance

Background

The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (Quality Council), set up in July 2010, operates under the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) approved originally by the executive heads of Ontario universities and the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV). The QAF was subsequently revised in response to the recommendations arising from the first Review of the QAF and Quality Council in 2017-18, with approval of the revised QAF by the Quality Council and OCAV occurring in February 2021. As part of these revisions, the Framework was split into two parts. Within Part One: Quality Assurance Principles for Ontario Universities and the Quality Council, an independent review of the Quality Council and the QAF is mandated to occur once every eight years, with this second review to occur five years subsequent to the 2021 revisions to the QAF (i.e., in 2026). This timeframe will also be eight years following the first review of the QAF in 2017/18.

Terms of Reference

1. The review will assess both the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) and its application by the Quality Council, its committees, and the Secretariat. The review will seek to address the following six themes from the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies of Higher Education (INQAAHE) revised International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ISG):

Theme 1: Legitimacy, Mission, and Governance

Theme 2: Organizational Capacity and Strategic Planning

Theme 3: Quality Assurance Framework

Theme 4: Evaluation and Outcomes

Theme 5: Quality Culture

Theme 6: Sector Engagement and Enhancement

Within these themes are 18 standards and 53 minimum requirements that are to be addressed as part of INQAAHE's review.

2. Additionally, the review will seek advice on and / or make recommendations for the following:
 - i. Do the Quality Council, its Committees and the Secretariat appropriately apply the QAF and perform their work efficiently, effectively and to the benefit of Ontario's universities?

- ii. Are the QAF's principles and associated processes still applicable, or are there recommended changes / revisions that would better facilitate the quality assurance of the academic programs offered by Ontario's universities?
 - iii. Does the QAF appropriately articulate a) the concept of continuous improvement; and b) the notion of compliance? Are these in line with current international standards?
 - iv. Are there any areas of ambiguity, misunderstanding or disagreement in the QAF?
 - v. Are there opportunities to reduce the burden on Ontario's universities by further streamlining the processes while still meeting international standards for quality assurance?
 - vi. Are the requirements for monitoring, reporting and accountability appropriate and meeting international standards for quality assurance?
3. The review will involve wide consultation with Ontario's universities, the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, and other interested parties.
 4. The criteria for assessment of quality assurance in Ontario universities will reflect international standards of exemplary quality assurance policy and practice.
 5. The review panel will be composed of three external members selected by INQAAHE. There should also be at least one additional member added to the panel, who is internal to the system, i.e., from Ontario. This is important in order to address specific issues that require knowledge of the local context, and because it is a QAF requirement.
 6. The review will be supported by a steering committee. The Steering Committee's role is to:
 - (a) Help manage the Review and navigate the process
 - (b) Assist with relations management
 - (c) Assist with stakeholder communications
 - (d) Provide regular updates to the Quality Council and OCAV
 7. The Steering Committee will receive the reviewers' report and submit it, with comments, to the Quality Council for its consideration.
 8. The reviewers' report and the Quality Council's corresponding decisions will be shared with OCAV.
 9. The reviewers' report, the Quality Council's responses and the associated action plan will then be made public.

Process

1. The Steering Committee is composed of six members: The Chair of the Quality Council; the Chairs of the Appraisal and Audit Committees; the QC Executive Director; the QC's Director of Operations; and an OCAV representative.

2. The Quality Council will hold a retreat to confirm these Terms and the goals of the 2025-26 review (spring 2025).
3. The panel of independent reviewers is struck by INQAAHE and the Quality Council (fall / winter 2025-26)
4. The review is announced to all Ontario universities and interested parties, inviting comment (summer 2025)
5. The self-evaluation document (SED) is prepared, with input from the Steering Committee, within six months of the formal commencement of INQAAHE's review (2025 / 2026)
6. The SED, with all required evidence (including stakeholder commentary) appended, is sent to the reviewers (winter 2026)
7. INQAAHE Review Panel's desk-based analysis of the SED and associated documentation may result in a request additional information or further evidence at this stage (within 30 working days of SED submission).
8. The Review Panel conducts a review visit, meeting with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Quality Council members, senior staff from the Secretariat, university representatives and government (within three months of SED submission)
9. The QA Secretariat prepares a fact-checking response and submits any final evidence not previously provided (within 10 working days of receipt of the report)
10. The Review Panel's report, with observations and recommendations, goes to the Steering Committee (within 20 working days of the end of the review visit)
11. The Steering Committee comments on recommendations and shares the report with the Quality Council. OCAV will also then receive the report and the Quality Council's subsequent decisions, for information (likely summer 2026)
12. The formal outcome will be communicated to the Quality Council by the Chair of the Recognition Committee (up to 20 working days of receiving the fact-checking response and additional evidence, as appropriate)
13. An Implementation Committee is formed, to provide oversight of the detailed work of responding to the recommendations (summer / fall 2026)
14. Extensive consultation on the proposed revisions to the QAF takes place, including with OCAV and other key stakeholder groups (winter / spring 2027)
15. The Quality Council comes to agreement on which recommendations are to be acted on and the implementation plans accordingly (to take effect by September 2027)