



PROGRAM QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESS AUDIT

QUESTION AND ANSWER

Why does the Ontario college system need a quality assurance process?

1. In approving the Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002 (the “Charter), government called for the establishment of self-regulatory mechanisms to ensure program ‘consistency’ and ‘quality’. The Credentials Validation Service is now operational and the system’s obligation to establish a province-wide quality assurance mechanism at the institutional level is yet to be implemented.
2. The college system cannot take a ‘wait-and-see’ approach to the probable quality assurance role of the suggested new Council on Higher Education, proposed by the Rae Review.
3. Since 2000, the Provincial Auditor General has called for an extension of public agency accountability to include “Value for Money Audits”, a need frequently underlined by the current and previous provincial governments.

Why introduce this quality assurance process at this time?

The Rae Review recommended that the Council on Higher Education have some responsibility for Quality Assurance. Arguably, it is prudent to implement a program quality assurance model that has been developed and vetted through the colleges’ academic community, rather than wait for the possible imposition of another model that may not be sympathetic to colleges’ advice, priorities, and limited resources.

What are the defining characteristics of this process that make it unique to the colleges of applied arts and technology in Ontario?

1. The PQAPA ‘Quality Assurance’ model assumes that college programs are of high quality. It is not a ‘quality assessment’ model that assumes quality may not exist.
2. The process for the development of the PQAPA:
 - a. Was driven by a set of Committee of Presidents (COP)- approved “guiding principles”;
 - b. Researched international best practices that conformed to the guiding principles;

- c. Was led by a joint team of college academic leaders, Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) policy advisors, and the Coordinating Committee of Vice-Presidents, Academic (CCVPA);
 - d. Produced a model which was approved in principle by the CCVPA and COP;
 - e. Produced a detailed implementation plan, in English and in French; and,
 - f. Resulted in a document that was recommended by the CCVPA for implementation, and approved by the COP for implementation as a one-year pilot project.
3. Colleges develop and implement their own program quality assurance processes relevant to their own situation. The external review mechanism will accommodate colleges in their own operating language.
 4. The criteria for program quality come from international best practices and are limited to those that contribute to, measure, or correlate with student learning and success. In this respect it is an ‘outcomes-based’ process.

Why is a third party review necessary? Why not accept the word of the colleges that they have quality programs?

The research could find no jurisdiction in which the “fund-me-and-trust-me” model was actually in place. To rely only on a self-report of the existence of quality would have no international credibility and would not meet the requirement to implement a self-regulatory mechanism for quality assurance at the institutional level.

Our research indicates that external review panels are part of international best practice. Most Ontario colleges’ quality assurance processes employ external review panels and offset the potential ‘self-serving nature of peer review panels’ by incorporating ‘outside-of-education’ appointees, administrative approval of recommendations, and a priority-based allocation model for the distribution of scarce resources.

What is the role of the Association (Colleges Ontario) in this process? Should a body that is created to advocate on behalf of the colleges be involved in evaluating their operations?

Under the current structure of Colleges Ontario (CO), there are a number of subsidiary organizations involved more in direct-service roles than in advocacy roles (CON*NECT, OCAS, CVS). Having the subsidiaries operate in these direct service ways does not take away from the effectiveness of the lobbying and advocating role of Colleges Ontario.

In this case, housing the operation of the PQAPA within the jurisdiction of the CVS makes sense from both a policy and economic point of view. From a policy perspective,

it is proposed that PQAPA and CVS be overseen by the same arms-length, independent management board. This is intended to assure policy continuity, monitor effectiveness, resolve conflicts, and guard the arms-length review process against undue individual college or government influence. From an economic point of view, clustering these services under the management of Colleges Ontario will keep the cost of province-wide start up, coordination, French- and English-language services, and annual audits below the preliminary estimate of \$250,000 per annum.

What is this process going to cost the colleges and the college system? Where will the money come from to pay for this?

A one-year budget of \$125,000 was approved by the COP to cover the establishment and operation of PQAPA for a “pilot year”. Subsequent operating budgets will be determined based on the results of the pilot project findings, and are expected to be lower.

A Canadian survey found that preparation for external reviews could cost between \$15,000 and \$80,000, although the VPAs on the Working Group estimate that larger colleges should anticipate a figure between \$25,000 and \$30,000.

Institutional operating costs for implementing their own internal quality assurance mechanisms will vary from college to college, and will reflect size, experience, and the current status of documentation.

While one might speculate on the willingness of government to flow monies to the colleges under the recommendations of the Rae Review, there are no promises of new monies at this time. However, government has provided \$600,000.00 through the Minister’s “Change Fund”, to assist with the development, implementation, and evaluation of a Pilot Project.

Some of the language in the draft documents was vague. Why are there no benchmarks established for colleges to meet, or against which to measure themselves?

Following the system-wide consultation process, much of what had been termed ‘vague’ or ‘subjective’ language was removed, thus providing a much tighter document.

To reflect the variance of colleges across the province, the different levels and stages of development amongst the colleges, and to avoid any sense of a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, a decision was made to relate all criteria to those that contribute to, reflect or correlate with student attainment of learning outcomes.

Benchmarks may evolve in time. The PQAPA documentation, however, represents international best practices in its inclusion of standards and guidelines for quality assurance. Colleges could, on the basis of their own internal self-evaluation, set specific targets, goals, or benchmarks that would indicate continuous improvement.

I already have a good quality assurance process in place in my college. Is this proposed Program Quality Assurance Process Audit not redundant, and requiring me to duplicate work we have already done in our college?

As noted above, this model is premised on the notion that colleges have quality assurance processes in place. One of the first steps in the model is that colleges undergo an internal self-assessment to determine the fit between their processes and the quality criterion to be used in the external review. Most VPAs confirm that some changes will be required.

When this has been done, the external review panel will confirm that the college is in fact doing what it says it is doing, and at the level it claims. The model limits the audit team's access to documentation and people specifically for the purpose of understanding the college's program quality assurance processes and auditing how they are implemented. The review team may ask for some additional materials which will further clarify or demonstrate the application of the college's processes in particular program areas. As reflected in the short duration (typically 1 day) of the on-site review, this would not require the college to replicate or duplicate work it had done in its own self-assessment.

What about implementation issues raised during consultation? How is this actually going to work?

While the consultation confirmed broad support for the PQAPA model, some questions and concerns were raised and have been addressed as follows:

1. The process has been fully piloted with 5 *volunteer* colleges, and formally evaluated after the first year of operation.
2. The implementation schedule will provide sufficient lead-time for colleges to prepare for their audit. It is proposed that colleges volunteer for the "pilot" and for early review, and that the remaining review schedule be finalized through negotiation.
3. The province-wide PQAPA coordination and operation will be integrated with the CVS office for efficiency.
4. The nomination of review panel members and chairs will be made by CCVPA for approval by the CVS Management Board. Panel chairs and members will be selected from an approved roster. The roster will consist of those nominees who have completed the required training program, and those who meet the linguistic prerequisites.¹

¹ Those nominated to review French language colleges will be confirmed by those colleges to be linguistically and experientially competent to do so.

5. Many anticipated that government would institute a ‘postsecondary education oversight body’ with a mandate that might include quality assurance. Many advised that the implementation of our own quality assurance model is preferable to waiting for an imposed solution.
6. To assist colleges in the development of their own quality assurance processes, the proposal outlines process criteria that are consistent with international best practices.
7. Potential ‘conflict of interest’ will be minimized by effectively selecting and training the audit panels, by ensuring the independence of each PQAPA audit, and by the Management Board’s role in approving nominees for audit panels, in assigning audit panels to colleges, in approving and releasing final Audit Reports, and in the on-going monitoring of fairness and equity of the audit processes.