

ONTARIO COLLEGES MOVING TO ACCREDITATION

July 2015



Ontario College Quality Assurance Service
Service de l'assurance de la qualité des collèges de
l'Ontario



Ontario's colleges will be moving to an institutional-level accreditation process for each institution (College Quality Assurance Accreditation Process- CQAAP), which will become effective in January 2016.

BACKGROUND

With the introduction of *The Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology Act, 2002* Ontario's public colleges were mandated by government to implement a process to assure quality. Two elements of this expectation were outlined: quality assurance at the individual college level; and, a self-regulating process at the system level.

In the development of an approach to self-regulation, a decision was made to focus on *quality assurance*: the mechanism or procedures used to assure or measure the level or existence of quality. To that end, the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS), a policy-driven, arms-length independent oversight and governance body established in 2005, focuses on: ensuring that programs leading to an Ontario College credential conform to the ministry's Credential Framework which functions through the Credentials Validation Service (CVS); and evaluating the effectiveness of quality assurance systems within the colleges which operates through the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA). The purpose of doing so is to contribute to and demonstrate through continual improvement efforts the development of the quality public of the college education in Ontario.

The current PQAPA model was developed through a joint government – college sector working group known as the Coordinating Committee of Vice-Presidents, Academic (CCVPA) / Colleges Branch of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) Working Group¹ between 2003 and 2005. Prior to the full implementation of the PQAPA a pilot project was conducted in five of the colleges of applied arts and technology. In the fall 2006 the Pilot Project was evaluated by Dr. William Massy. His evaluation confirmed that the PQAPA reflected global best practices and was well suited to the needs of the Ontario college system at that time.

FOUNDATIONS FOR MOVING THE COLLEGE SYSTEM IN ONTARIO FROM AUDIT TO ACCREDITATION

Current Canadian Quality Assurance Landscape

Canada lacks a consistent and comprehensive approach to quality assurance for its institutions of higher education. While impressive in the array of methods of *program* assessment, Canada is lacking any assessment or assurance methods at the *institutional* level. The absence of a Canadian body that recognizes its institutions quality standing makes their acceptance more difficult on the global stage. The reality of this lack of an accepted Canadian accreditation system at the institutional level has resulted in some postsecondary institutions in Canada seeking accreditation from American accrediting agencies. While this recognition by the American accrediting organizations may be an indicator of institutional quality extending beyond borders, it is also a fact that these external (to Canada) agencies do not provide quality assurance frameworks that account for the characteristics of Canada's higher education context.

¹ CCVPA /MTCU Working Group on Charter Program Policy Issues had membership from the Coordinating Committee of Vice-Presidents, Academic (CCVPA) and the Colleges Branch of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). This group was co-chaired by the Director of the Colleges Branch and a Vice-President, Academic.



In Ontario

In Ontario there are currently four “quality-related” organizations that impact post-secondary education: the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS); the Ontario University Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA); the Post-Secondary Education Quality Assurance Board (PEQAB); and, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). Of these four bodies, the OCQAS and the OUCQA are focused on providing quality assurance at the *program level* and the *institutional level*. The introduction of the OUCQA process in 2010 mirrors, to some extent, the processes developed and undertaken by the OCQAS. At the program level, there are many similarities between the operation of these two bodies; one for the college sector and the other for the university sector. As well, OCQAS and OUCQA are the only two quality-related bodies that are completely independent from government, as both HEQCO and PEQAB are arms-length agencies of the provincial government.

Increase desire for more international outreach and need for greater credibility of Ontario Colleges on the global stage.

The Ontario public colleges, through the work of OCQAS have developed a strong, well-received, and effective quality assurance system since 2005. Despite the effectiveness of the existing audit model, changes in the higher education environment, such as; heightened demands for accountability, new forms of instructional delivery, and the globalization of higher education, are increasing pressures on the colleges. Therefore, with a desire for more international outreach and a need for greater credibility of Ontario public colleges, the colleges are adopting an accreditation system.

Following the external review and evaluation of the current quality audit model (PQAPA) by Dr. John Randall using international validated criteria it was obvious that the OCQAS already provided much of the structure and processes that are required to be a viable accrediting agency allowing the system to move from a model of academic audit to a more widely recognized model of accreditation.

MOVING FROM AUDIT TO ACCREDITATION

What is the difference between audit and accreditation?

The current PQAPA is by design and by definition an *audit* model for quality assurance and continuous improvement. An audit is an activity during which is checked the internal quality assurance system at an institutional and/ or program level. The audit approach is founded on the principle that, good processes will produce good results, but that faulty processes will prevent even good people and plentiful resources from producing optimal results.

An audit (like the current PQAPA) is designed to determine how an institution ensures that standards are met. The role and responsibility of an institution’s internal quality assurance system is to ensure that it is reaching its stated objectives and demonstrating continuous improvement. **Audits evaluate the effectiveness and comprehensiveness of the institutions quality assurance system**, and, in making a judgment, will express some level of confidence, based on the evidence provided, in the quality of the institutions’ system to do what it says it is doing.

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Different from an audit, accreditation is both a **status** and a **process**. As a status, accreditation provides public notification that an institution or program



meets standards of quality set forth by an accrediting agency. As a process, same as an audit, accreditation reflects the fact that the institution or program is committed to self-study and external review by one's peers in seeking not only to meet standards but to continuously seek ways in which to enhance the quality of education and training provided. It fosters excellence in postsecondary education through the development of principles and guidelines for assessing educational effectiveness.

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The goal of an accreditation status for institutions of higher education is to provide public assurance that the education provided by the institution meets acceptable levels of quality **as defined by the accreditation process and model**. Accreditation is intended to strengthen and sustain quality and integrity of higher education, make it worthy of public confidence. Such designation will provide the broader assurance, acceptance, and recognition of the quality of Ontario's public colleges. The extent to which each educational institution accepts and fulfills the responsibilities inherent in the process is a measure of its concern for quality in higher education and its commitment to striving for and achieving excellence in its endeavors (quality assurance and continuous improvement).

It is worth noting here that a report issued by the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI)² underscored, "...the value in sustaining the determination of quality as a non-government function. The responsibility for evaluating how well an institution is accomplishing its educational work can and should rest exclusively with the institution and/or the accrediting bodies". The report further acknowledges that with accreditation being a system of self-regulation, the involvement of member institutions in the process of establishing the standards and then applying them in a peer review situation, accreditation also promotes an understanding of the expectations and buy-in for the standards and policies.

CONFORMING TO AN ACCREDITATION MODEL: EVALUATIVE FACTORS

Consideration was given to the operation of the current academic audit (PQAPA) against five criteria in an attempt to describe the current level of functioning of the academic audit model and to identify to what extent the current model conforms to foundational accreditation guidelines (principles, practices, standards, characteristics).

1. The first of these criteria is the initial *Guiding Principles* set out by the Committee of Presidents in 2003 as a guide to which any acceptable quality assurance process would conform. Colleges mirrored these principles that incorporate processes to ensure 'ownership of quality'.
2. The second are internationally accepted standards for quality assurance agencies, more precisely the *Guidelines of Good Practice* developed by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). In 2011, the OCQAS received recognition from the INQAAHE as being an agency that meets the *Guidelines of Good Practice*.
3. The third are the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies produced by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

² National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI). Report to the U.S. Secretary of Education. Higher Education Act Reauthorization: Accreditation Policy Recommendations. April 2012, p.2.



4. The fourth are the defining or elemental characteristics of an accreditation model suggested by Dill et al (1996).
5. The final are the central characteristics of accreditation released by the American Council on Education (ACE) in their report to the National Taskforce on Institutional Accreditation (2012).

On the basis of the comparison of the current academic audit model (PQAPA) with foundational accreditation guidelines, the OCQAS, as indicated in the Randall report, has all the essential pieces in place to evolve to an *accreditation* model for the colleges in Ontario.

WHY IS ACCREDITATION IMPORTANT?

Although graduating from an accredited institution and/or program does not guarantee jobs or licensure for individuals, it may facilitate such achievement. It reflects the quality by which an educational institution or a program conducts its business. It speaks to a sense of public trust, as well as to professional quality.

As a student: Accreditation provides assurance that the institution or program in which the student is enrolled or is considering enrolling is engaged in continuous review and improvement of its quality, that it meets established standards, and that it is accountable for achieving what it sets out to do.

As a faculty member: Accreditation provides a formal process for ongoing evaluation and improvement of the institution's programs and services and faculty development outcomes, a process by which faculty, students, and administration can work together in advancing the educational institution's mission.

As a member of the public: Accreditation ensures public accountability of a program or an institution that it has the means and demonstrates the outcomes for its educational process that are consistent with its goals and objectives; in other words, that there is 'truth in advertising'.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

In preparation for accreditation and as a part of OCQAS's system of continuous improvement of its own activities that emphasizes flexibility in response to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and its contribution towards the achievement of its objectives, the OCQAS continues to engage in a range of activities:

- The OCQAS has conducted an internal *self-review* of its own activities, including of its own effect and values. The OCQAS has also been subject to external reviews: the evaluation of the PQAPA pilot in 2006 (Massy Report), and the review of the OCQAS services in 2010 (J Randall Report).
- The OCQAS recognizes that the quality assurance processes and practices are the responsibility of the institution, and that as independent entities they are best positioned to develop and implement policies, practices, and procedures that best suit their own experience. In that respect the OCQAS continues to take a consultative approach in all aspects of the delivery of service.
- Finally, the OCQAS collaborates in areas such as exchange of good practices, capacity building and review of decision, provision of transnational education, and joint projects.



Appendix

FOUNDATIONAL ACCREDITATION GUIDELINES

Guiding Principles (COP)

1. Be consistent with international best practices.
2. Be effective, efficient, and cyclical.
3. Give appropriate notice to colleges prior to review.
4. Be described and operate as an audit to provide a review of each college's educational quality assurance processes and policies to ensure that minimum standards are met.
5. Use an external, competent, mutually-agreeable, objective peer review panel.
6. Follow a mandatory and clear process that identifies strengths and weaknesses, recommends improvements, and facilitates positive change.
7. Distribute the preliminary report to the college for their response and include the college response in the final report.
8. Provide for categories of approval.
9. Provide a method and system for appeals against its decisions and reports.
10. Provide for consistency of panel decisions.
11. Be sustainable and affordable for the system as a whole and for the individual colleges in the system.

Guidelines of Good Practice (INQAAHE)

1. The External Quality Assurance Agency (EQAA): Accountability, Transparency, and Resources:
 - **Governance:** The EQAA has a written mission statement or set of objectives that takes into account the cultural and historical context of the EQAA. The statement explicitly provides that external quality assurance is a major activity of the EQAA, and it requires a systematic approach to achieving the mission or objectives of the EQAA. There is evidence that the statement of objectives is implemented pursuant to a practical management plan that is linked to EQAA resources. The ownership and governance structure is appropriate for the objectives of the agency.
 - **Resources:** The EQAA has adequate and accessible human and financial resources to conduct external evaluation effectively and efficiently in accordance with its mission statement and its methodological approach. The EQAA's resources are also adequate for the appropriate development of the agency.
 - **Quality Assurance of EQAA:** The EQAA has a system of continuous quality assurance of its own activities that emphasizes flexibility in response to the changing nature of higher education, the effectiveness of its operations, and its contribution towards the achievement of its objectives. The EQAA conducts internal *self-review* of its own activities, including consideration of its own effect and value. The review includes data and analysis. The EQAA is subject to external reviews at regular intervals. There is evidence that any required actions are implemented and disclosed
 - **Reporting Public Information:** The EQAA informs and responds to the public in accordance with applicable legislation and the cultural context of the EQAA. This includes full and clear disclosure of its relevant documentation such as policies, procedures, and criteria. The EQAA also demonstrates public accountability by reporting its decisions about higher education



institutions and programs. The content and extent of reporting may vary with cultural context and applicable legal and other requirements. If the external evaluation leads to a decision about the higher education institution or program, the procedures applied and the criteria for decision-making are public, and the criteria for review are transparent, public, and ensure equality of treatment. The EQAA also discloses to the public the decisions about the EQAA resulting from any external review of its own performance.

2. Institutions of Higher Education and the EQAA: Relationship, Standards, and Internal Reviews
 - **The Relationship between the EQAA and the HE Institutions:** The EQAA recognizes that institutional and programmatic quality and quality assurance are primarily the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves; respects the academic autonomy, identity, and integrity of the institutions or programs; applies standards and criteria that have been subjected to reasonable consultation with stakeholders; and, aims to contribute to both quality improvement and accountability of the institution.
 - **The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional / Program Performance:** The EQAA has documents that indicate clearly what the EQAA expects of the institution. Those expectations (or standards) are appropriate for the core activities of an institution of higher education or program. The standards should explicitly address all areas of institutional activity that fall within the EQAA's scope, such as teaching, learning, research, community work, etc. and necessary resources such as finance, staff/faculty, and learning resources. Standards may refer to specific areas, levels of achievement, relative benchmarking and types of measures, and may provide general guidelines. They may also include specific learning goals.
 - **The EQAA's Requirements for Institutional Self-Evaluation and Reporting to the EQAA:** The documentation concerning self-evaluation explains to the institutions of higher education the purposes, procedures, process and expectations in the self-evaluation process. The documents also include the standards used, the decision criteria, the reporting format, and other information needed by the higher education institution. Typically, an EQAA review process includes a self-evaluation through self-study by the institution or program, external peer review, and a follow-up procedure. As necessary and appropriate, the EQAA guides the institution or program in the application of the procedures of the quality assurance process, such as self-evaluation, external review, or solicitation of assessment/feedback from the public, students, and other constituents.
3. EQAA Review of Institutions: Evaluation, Decisions, and Appeals
 - **The EQAA's evaluation of the Institution and/or Program:** The EQAA has clear documentation concerning the external evaluation that states the standards used, assessment methods and processes, decision criteria, and other information necessary for external review. The EQAA also has specifications on the characteristics, selection, and training of reviewers. The EQAA's system must ensure that each institution or program will be evaluated in an equivalent way, even if the external panels, teams, or committees are different. The system ensures that the external reviewers meet the EQAA specifications, and the external reviewers are adequate to the tasks to be accomplished; external reviewers have no conflict of interest; external reviewers receive necessary training; and, external reviewers' reports are evidence-based and clear, with precisely stated conclusions. When



- practical, the EQAA should include at least one external reviewer from another country or jurisdiction in the review panel.
- **Decisions:** The EQAA evaluations address both the higher education institution's own self-assessment and external reference points, such as judgments by knowledgeable peers or relevant legislation. An EQAA must be independent, i.e. it has autonomous responsibility for its operations, and its judgments cannot be influenced by third parties. The EQAA's decisions must be impartial, rigorous, thorough, fair, and consistent, even if the judgments are made by different panels. Consistency in decision-making includes consistency and transparency in processes and actions for imposing recommendations for follow-up action. The EQAA's reported decisions are clear and precise. When the EQAA advises the government or other public bodies, the decisions made by each agency should be made as independently as practicable.
 - **Appeals:** The EQAA has appropriate methods and policies for appeals. Appeals should be conducted by reviewers who were not responsible for the original decision and who have no conflict of interest. However, appeals need not necessarily be conducted outside the EQAA.
4. External Activities: Collaboration with other agencies and transnational / cross-border education
- **Collaboration:** The EQAA collaborates with other EQAAs, if possible, in areas such as exchange of good practices, capacity building and review of decisions, provision of transnational education, joint projects, and staff exchanges.
 - **Transnational / Cross-Border Higher Education:** The EQAA has policies relating to both imported and exported higher education. These policies may be the same as those for domestic providers and domestic provision. In formulating its policies and practices, the EQAA should consider relevant guidelines issued by international agencies and other associations. All EQAs should consult with appropriate local agencies involved in the exporting or importing countries, although this might not be possible or appropriate in situations such as those involving distance learning or small enrollments.

Guidelines for External Quality Assurance Agencies (ENQA)

1. Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education: The EQAA's should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes used by the Higher Education (HE) institution.
2. Official status: EQAA's should be formally recognized by competent public authorities as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis.
3. Activities: EQAA's should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or program level) on a regular basis.
4. Resources: EQAA's should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organize and run the external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.
5. Mission statement: Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.
6. Independence: Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their



reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

7. External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies: the processes, criteria, and procedures used by the agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:
 - A self-assessment or equivalent process;
 - An external assessment by a group of experts;
 - Publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations, or other formal outcomes;
 - A follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the agency in light of any recommendations contained in the report.
8. Accountability procedures: Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

Characteristics of Accreditation (Dill et al.)

1. Accreditation encompasses both the objectives and the implementation of objectives: for example, it determines whether the objectives are appropriate for the institutional level, and whether the resources are available to produce the desired outcomes.
2. Accreditation is criterion-references; that is, it compares observed performance against preset standards usually determined by the accrediting agency.
3. Accreditation is always performed by an agency external to the institution itself.
4. Accreditation is voluntary; and, accreditation status does not bestow upon an institution its license to operate.
5. Accreditation may be performed at the institutional or program level, with program-level accreditation being most common in professional fields.
6. Accreditation cycles are typically in the range of 10 years unless serious problems are uncovered; such problems will lead to shorter cycle times or probationary status being determined.
7. Accreditation final outcomes (reports) are always published; such publication is necessary for accreditation to perform its certification function. However, details may be withheld to avoid adversarial relationship.

Central Characteristics of Accreditation (ACE)

1. Accreditation is nongovernmental.
 - Accreditation should not be owned or operated by any level of government. Accreditation can provide governments (at all levels) with a rigorous and substantial quality regimen which they (the government) do not subsidize or finance.
2. Accreditation is rigorous.
 - An accreditation review is a complex, rigorous process that involves a large number of actors from within and outside the institution who comprehensively examine all major aspects of its operation. Many colleges and universities that seek regional accreditation do not obtain it. At the same time, significant numbers of accredited institutions have made notable improvements in their academic programs and student services as a result of reviews.
3. Accreditation protects institutional autonomy and academic freedom.



- The ability of both institutions and individual scholars to pursue teaching and scholarship is a long-established and critical aspect of higher education's effectiveness. Accreditation actively protects academic freedom by ensuring institutional missions remain at the heart of the process and that faculty define what students should learn, thereby honoring the shared value of educating the diverse populations served by institutions with differing missions.
4. Accreditation is based on peer review and institutional self-study.
 - Peer review relies on members of a professional community to examine one another's practices rigorously based on professional norms or standards. Peer review is the foundation of professional integrity in many disciplines and largely defines what it means to be a profession. Unlike legislation or regulation, peer-based judgments can be applied flexibly and adjusted to local circumstances on the basis of shared expertise. Peer review also promotes the dissemination and exchange of best practices as faculty and administrators visit other institutions and provide advice designed to improve performance.
 5. Accreditation serves both institutions and the public.
 - When done well, accreditation provides potential students, policymakers, and the public with strong assurance that a given institution is sound, acts with integrity, and offers students an education of value. Accreditation also provides institutions under review with information and advice that can be used to enhance academic quality. As accreditation decisions are made on judgments against established criteria, and an institutions own evaluation of their performance against these criteria, it generally means that the institutions are active and willing participants in this non-adversarial approach, as a result reliable judgments can be expected.
 6. Accreditation preserves institutional diversity.
 - As accreditation is centered on how effectively each institution is fulfilling its own mission, the accreditation process preserves the diversity of higher education institutions and system, while at the same time providing valuable information about institutional quality to the public. Accreditation at its most effective serves the public interest on two levels. By identifying and weeding out institutions of substandard quality, it protects potential students from making bad choices and helps assure policymakers and taxpayers that resources are invested in high-quality institutions. At the same time, by demonstrating meaningful self-regulation across the enterprise as a whole, accreditation helps assure the integrity of the entire system of higher education.