

## **Session 3-4**

### **The Impact of the Quality Assurance Process on Ontario's Colleges**

**Tim Klassen**

CCW dip, BA

Director, Ontario College Quality Assurance Service

Toronto, Ontario Canada

#### **Abstract**

In 2006 the Ontario colleges undertook a bold new foray into the world of external quality assurance with the implementation of the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit. Now into the 8<sup>th</sup> year of quality audits the impacts on the colleges is being seen and measured. As quality assurance and continuous improvement remain at the forefront of this process, the college system, building on the positive results of the audits, is transitioning to a full accreditation system for the colleges: a first in Canada. In this session, participants will hear from college personnel the impact this process is having on their institutions and the development of quality culture within.

Canada is unique in that it does not have a federal, centralized education body as the responsibility for structure, development and implementation of education is a provincial responsibility. As a result there are numerous and varied approaches to quality assurance processes found throughout the provinces and territories, with no over-arching guiding body at the national level. One of the most progressive and effective systems found in Canada is the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service.

Ontario's 24 public colleges have developed and implemented an institutionally-focused academic audit process through which colleges become recognized as quality institutions and move from anecdotal-based positions of, "We think we are pretty good", to a documented, evidence-based position of an institution with quality systems throughout. The Ontario public college system, through the development and implementation of the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA) model has, since 2005, demonstrated its commitment to an evidence-based quality assurance and continuous improvement model of sustainable quality assurance for its 24 member colleges.

The session will draw on two separate data sets to look and articulate the impact the PQAPA has had on the public Colleges in Ontario. The first of these will refer to and draw from a research paper done by Linda Saari<sup>1</sup> that looked specifically at the question: What has been the impact of the PQAPA on Colleges? In 2009 she published the results of her study of 13 Colleges who had undergone the Academic Audit process known as the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA). The second source we will look at are the actual results of the Audits done with the Colleges and will look more specifically at the question of whether or not we are able to see and measure continuous improvement in the colleges as shown by the results of the completed Audits.

The PQAPA was initially designed and implemented in 2006 as a pilot project to introduce an approach to institutional – level quality assurance for the public colleges in Ontario. The impetus for this was a mandate given by the provincial; government to the college sector be become "self-regulating in the area of quality" in exchange for more autonomy and authority in terms of their programming. There were 5 colleges who volunteered to be part of this pilot project. Following this, the process was evaluated by Dr. William Massy<sup>2</sup> who concluded:

*I have tested the results against my understanding of global best practices in higher education quality assurance – an understanding based on participation in and study of QA processes in the USA, UK, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, Denmark, Sweden, and other countries. My overall conclusion is that PQAPA meets its stated goals, is consistent with global best practices, and is the right process for Ontario.*

Following this, full implementation of the Audit process was instituted with 5

colleges being audited each year, on a five-year cycle. The Audit was completed against a set of (at that time) 5 characteristics of quality higher education institutions (colleges and universities) that were identified after looking at various quality assurance processes around the world. It was no surprise that all of these characteristics were related to, or co-related with, student success. The self - study conducted by the college asked it to determine the extent to which its quality assurance processes (policies, practices or procedures) met or exceed the quality characteristics which were articulated as:

1. Admission, credit for prior learning, promotion, graduation and other related academic policies support program development and student achievement of program learning outcomes.
2. Programs conform to the Framework for Programs of Instruction and the Credentials Framework, are consistent with accepted college system nomenclature / program titling principles, and maintain relevance.
3. Methods of program delivery and student evaluation are consistent with the program learning outcomes.
4. Human, physical, financial, and support resources to support student achievement of program learning outcomes are available and accessible.
5. Regular program quality assessment that involves faculty, students, industry representatives, and others as appropriate for the purpose of continual improvement is in place and happens.

To fully understand the impact the PQAPA had on the colleges, it is important to know how the colleges saw themselves prior to the implementation of the Audits. In her research, Saari interviewed Vice-Presidents, Academic from 13 Colleges who had been involved in the Audits to establish the perception of the colleges' status regarding quality assurance processes that were at play within their institutions. Among the anecdotal findings of the Saari study was the fact that:

- 9 colleges (through the VPAs) reported having *already established quality assurance processes / policies* in place prior to the implementation of PQAPA, while 4 were *beginning to formalize* their processes;
- 8 colleges stated their program review process was *well established and working*, while 4 reported their process *was established and in the introductory stages*, and 1 reported their process was *just being formed* or revised;
- 7 reported their *program review process changed prior* to the Audit, while 5 reported *changes following* the Audit; In 3 cases *changes were identified before and after* the Audit;
- 6 VPAs reported being *actively involved* in the preparation of the self-study, while 7 reported being *somewhat involved*;

- 10 VPAs reported being *actively involved* in reporting the results of the Audit and 3 reported being *somewhat involved*;
- 9 VPAs reported being *actively involved* in planning for continuous improvement, while 3 were *somewhat involved* and 1 was *somewhat uninvolved*;
- 8 VPAs reported being *actively involved* in the implementation of the action / continuous improvement plans developed following the Audit, while 5 reported being *somewhat involved*;

Saari notes the emergence of three consistent themes from her study. These themes, which she identifies as being in virtually every college's response, were:

- ✓ The value in self-reflection as required by the Self-Study;
- ✓ The power of the feedback through the confirmations and affirmations made by the Audit Teams; and,
- ✓ The usefulness of the constructive feedback from the recommendations made for the college

Beneath these over-arching themes that were seen, there was unanimous agreement from all 13 college VPAs that they experienced some changes as a result of the Audit, albeit in 7 cases the VPAs indicated the changes were made "to a small extent" and in many cases these changes were credited not to the Audit process; rather, to transitions already underway as a result of other college initiatives. However, among the anecdotal changes that were reported:

- 10 colleges reported increased departmental discussion about quality assurance;
- 8 colleges reported an increase in cross departmental discussions about quality assurance;
- 8 colleges reported improved information being available about college best practices;
- 6 colleges reported improved collegial approaches within and between departments/schools; and
- 5 colleges reported an increase in the clarification of responsibilities for improving learning and teaching.

Many additional changes were noted by individual colleges in relation to the practices of quality assurance within their institutions and in the context of quality work being undertaken. Among these changes that were noted were:

- The profile of quality assurance was raised inside the college, creating a more formalized and evidence-based approach to quality assurance, resulting in less skepticism and more confidence as processes were viewed in terms of quality assurance;

- The use of ‘new nomenclature’ and common language about quality, which in turn helped to engage stakeholders;
- More emphasis placed on transferability and coring of courses;
- The impetus to continue having quality assurance teams or task forces in the colleges;
- An increased consolidated approach helped to expedite quality initiatives; and,
- The identification of existing quality assurance practices (best practices) increased enthusiasm about quality initiatives; and, stakeholders became more engaged in dialogue and activities related to quality work.

Following the full implementation of the PQAPA (all 24 colleges had undergone an Audit), another external review and evaluation of the quality service was commissioned by the Management Board, this time under the direction and leadership of John Randall<sup>3</sup>, former head of the QAA in Great Britain. The results of this evaluation included:

- ✓ The addition of one more quality characteristic dealing specifically with program learning outcomes. This brought the number of quality criteria to 6;
- ✓ The expansion of the Management Board to include more external members and thus achieve a more balanced membership which would bring the Board in line with international standards for Board of quality assurance agencies;
- ✓ The addition of one staff position in the OCQAS to facilitate and support the on-going work with the Colleges in the continuing quality work; and,
- ✓ Application for recognition being made to INQAAHE that the OCQAS was an agency that adhered to and met the Guidelines of Good Practice. This was seen as the next necessary step for the Service to take in establishing an Accreditation service for the public colleges in Ontario.

At the same time, the OCQAS was gathering data about how the colleges were being evaluated / rated against the quality criteria as we moved into the second round of Audits. This meant that we were beginning to Audit colleges for a second time; albeit this time against an additional quality criteria. As a result there were few “direct” comparisons that could be drawn; however, there was enough data to indicate whether or not there was demonstrable continuous improvement happening in the individual institutions and across the system.

It is important at this point to take a few minutes to describe the “rating system” that came out of the Audit process. As noted, with the first round of 24 Audits there were 5 quality criteria against which colleges were to rate themselves as either having MET the criteria, PARTIALLY MET the criteria, or NOT MET the criteria. Each criterion had a number of Requirements (from 3 to 8) under it, against which the college needed to be able to provide evidence. In order to be deemed to have MET the

criterion, the college needed to provide evidence against all of the Requirements. Where there was evidence against most (more than 50%) and not all the Requirements, the criterion itself was deemed to have been PARTIALLY MET. In cases where there was evidence against less than 50% of the Requirements, the criterion was deemed to have been NOT MET.

The results of the first five colleges to undergo the Audit as part of the pilot project are depicted in Table 1:

<b># of Colleges</b>	<b># of criteria MET</b>	<b># of Criteria PARTALLY MET</b>	<b># of criteria NOT MET</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>

Following the service Review by Massy in 2006, minor adjustments to the process were made and over the next 4 years the remaining 19 colleges were audited.

The results of these colleges are depicted in Table 2:

<b># of Colleges</b>	<b># of criteria MET</b>	<b># of Criteria PARTALLY MET</b>	<b># of criteria NOT MET</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>

The results were not surprising to the Management Board (or to the system as a whole) as colleges themselves had indicated they were in various stages of “readiness” for the Audits. What was of some surprise to us was where colleges were doing well and where they were struggling to find and provide evidence of quality processes being in place and working within their institutions. A look at the rating of the individual criterion shows areas of difficulty or the actual places where the colleges, or the Audit Teams, were unable to find or substantiate the existence of

good evidence that the criteria were being met. A breakdown of the ratings against the original 5 criteria is depicted below in Table 3:

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>MET</b>	<b>PARTALLY MET</b>	<b>NOT MET</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>

The biggest surprise came in relation to the results against criterion 5, which is the criterion that deals with regular quality program review. In looking more in-depth at the results here, the issue is one of lack of evidence rather than lack of process. Every institution says they have program review policies and practices in place; however, only 12 of the 29 Audits revealed the colleges could provide evidence that the processes were in place and were being effective enough to produce adequate evidence to meet the Requirements of the criterion.

A second, and somewhat less dramatic, area of surprise was in relation to criterion 2 which dealt with the college having quality processes in place to ensure their programs all were consistent with government policy. It was expected that all colleges would have MET this criterion.

While Randall, et al (in 2010) were reviewing and evaluating the Quality Service, the original 5 colleges (those that were part of the pilot project) were again audited, this time using the revised/enhanced approach that was used with the other 19 colleges in the first round.

The results of this 2011 audit of the 5 colleges who were in the pilot project are depicted below in Table 4:

<b># of Colleges</b>	<b># of criteria MET</b>	<b># of Criteria PARTALLY MET</b>	<b># of criteria NOT MET</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>

As this was the first time we had re-audited some colleges, we were able to see the extent of improvement / impact on the colleges over 5 years. The interesting fact here is that while there were again 2 colleges deemed to have MET all 5 criteria, they were not the same 2 colleges that MET all 5 in the pilot round. This means that 2 of 5, or 40%, showed improvement from one Audit to the next while 3 of 5, or 60% showed no improvement; in fact, they showed a decrease in measurable quality processes in their institutions. A closer look at the results shows that:

- 2 colleges went from a rating of 4 and 1 to a rating of 5 and 0
- 1 college went from a rating of 5 and 0 to a rating of 4 and 1
- 1 colleges went from a rating of 5 and 0 to a rating of 3 and 2
- 1 college went from a rating of 3 and 2 to a rating of 2 and 3

Since the Randall Report was received and changes have been implemented, the process of PQAPA is continuing and we are conducting audits on 5 colleges a year. To date we have been able to re-audit 9 colleges (including the 5 from the pilot round) and when we look at the comparators between the results of the first Audit against the results of the second Audit for these colleges (excluding the pilot round) we see the following:

- 1 college went from a rating of 2 and 3 to a rating of 6 and 0
- 2 colleges went from a rating of 3 and 2 to a rating of 6 and 0
- 1 college went from a rating of 3 and 2 to a rating of 2 and 4.

This small sample shows that 3 of the 4, or 75%, colleges were able to show improvement from the first Audit to the second Audit. This also includes the addition of one more quality criteria for these 4 colleges.

When we combine the results of the 9 colleges who have been re-audited we find that 5 of the 9 have been able to show improvement one Audit to the next. This represents an improvement rate of 55% and is a improvement from the 40% seen with the first 5.

We are continuing with the Audits and will be looking for this trend to continuous improvement to continue. Many of the institutional changes and impacts noted by Saari in her study have continued and Colleges by and large are committing time, energy and resources to the development, implementation, and continuing support of quality assurance centers or departments within the institution. There has been an embracing of the notion of quality processes being a part of good “business” for the colleges and with this a commitment to continuous improvement.

With the decision in 2011 to move the Audit process to an Accreditation process beginning in 2015 has also served to underscore the importance of this quality initiative in the Ontario college system.

---

<sup>1</sup> Saari, Linda: *The Impact of the Program Quality Assurance Program Audit on the Ontario College System*. Athabasca, Alberta, February 2009

<sup>2</sup> Massy, William – *Review of the Pilot Project Implementation of the PQAPA Model in Ontario Colleges*. Report to the OCQAS Management Board available at [www.ocqas.org](http://www.ocqas.org)

<sup>3</sup> Randall, John – was engaged to chair a three-person review and evaluation of the operations and structure of the OCQAS. The Report to the Management Board is available at [www.ocqas.org](http://www.ocqas.org)