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Journeys within the Credentials Framework: One Organization's Tales of Quality Assurance within A Jurisdictional Qualifications Framework

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Abstract

The Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) came to be as the result of a major shift in how Ontario's colleges were governed. It was decided that, through legislation, they would be granted greater autonomy. In return, they would take on the task on performing quality assurance on their own programs. The Credentials Validation Service (CVS) began operations in 2005. Since that time, it has faced a number of challenges: questions surrounding its legitimacy, the scope of its operations and the changing face of postsecondary education in Ontario. This paper describes these ongoing questions and anticipates future challenges.

Context

In Canada, the provinces and territories are responsible for the structure, development and implementation of education: there is no federal, centralized body that oversees education at any level. As a result, each province and territory has adopted its own approach to quality assurance, in accordance with its unique system design, and to meet the needs of its students, communities and employers. In Ontario, Canada's largest province, the post-secondary education sector is made up primarily of twenty four Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology (colleges), and twenty universities. Each sector (colleges and universities) has its respective mandate and operates within its respective legislative and regulatory framework.

In this paper, we describe the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service's (OCQAS) experience since it began operations in 2005, and we outline some of the key challenges that we have faced. We go on to outline some of the key challenges that the OCQAS has faced working within the boundaries of a government-established qualifications framework and by the related legislation.

The overall landscape of postsecondary quality assurance in Ontario is somewhat disjointed. Universities and colleges each have their own mechanisms. At the program level, legislation requires college certificates and diplomas to be validated against the Credentials Framework by the Credentials Validation Service (CVS). At the institutional/organizational level, the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA) assures ongoing institutional-level quality processes. The quality of university credentials is assessed internally and assured by a new agency, the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance. Interestingly, the processes used by the Council on Quality Assurance are very similar to those used by the OCQAS. In addition to the universities, other postsecondary institutions – including Ontario colleges – may seek ministerial consent to grant degrees. These degree proposals are assessed by a third organization, the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), which, unlike OCQAS and the Quality Council, is an arms-length government body. PEQAB is coordinated by a secretariat which is housed within the government and assesses degree-level credentials against its own degree framework. In sum, in Ontario there is one quality assurance agency for the province's 20 publicly-assisted universities, one quality assurance agency for the 24 Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology, and one quality assessment body for college degree programs. These three agencies use three separate but similar frameworks. The Quality Council uses a series of Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Level Expectations; PEQAB uses its own Degree Level Standards; and OCQAS uses the Credentials Framework. These three documents are integrated, to some extent, in the Ministry-published Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF) (Ministry of Training

Colleges and Universities (MTCU), 2009). However, the intent of the OQF is to describe the province's postsecondary education landscape, not to prescribe the requirements within it.

In this paper, we begin by providing a brief historical overview of Quality Assurance in Ontario's Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology. We continue with the discussion of some of the challenges that have arisen since the establishment of the OCQAS, namely, government perceptions, the ability of credentials in Ontario to be "stacked" and/or combined meaningfully, and the issue of three-year college diplomas. In each of these sections dealing with issues, we discuss potential courses of action to address the issue in the hopes of remedying it. We conclude with a brief discussion of the future of the OCQAS

A brief history of quality assurance in ontario's colleges

Ontario's current system came to be as a result of a major shift in thinking that manifested itself increasingly over time. Originally established in 1965 with a mandate to deliver vocational education to support the demand for skills of Ontario's growing economy, the college system evolved within the boundaries of this mission. One major step was with the 1993 establishment of the College Standards and Accreditation Council (CSAC), which was tasked with the development of provincial program standards. With this change, outcomes-based education was adopted in earnest. This paved the way for learning outcomes to be used more widely, not just for programs of instruction, but also for quality assurance.

In 2002, after 35 years of proven success, Ontario's colleges were legislated much greater autonomy in the area of program development and approval. The new legislation allowed the colleges to demonstrate that they are successfully achieving their missions. Another key change that was introduced with this devolution of autonomy was a formal move to outcomes-based credentialing. Driving this change was the Credentials Framework (MTCU, 2004), a government policy document that uses outcomes to describe the qualifications typically offered by Ontario's public colleges. In return for greater autonomy, the college system was required through legislation to become self-regulating and to provide its own quality assurance, which took the shape of the Credentials Validation Service. CVS' major role is to validate new and revised college program outcomes against the Credentials Framework. In this validation, CVS must ensure that outcomes are written at the appropriate level, that there is province-wide consistency in terms of program outcomes and titling, that programs are consistent with the applied nature of college education, and that students would be able to reasonably achieve the outcomes once they have completed the program.

It soon became evident that in order to close the quality loop, it was not sufficient simply to validate new programs, but to ensure that quality in each institution was systematized. In 2006-07, a quality academic audit process known as the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA) was piloted. Following an external review of the pilot, a number of changes were made and the model was adopted. It has since operated on a 5-year cycle. One key area that this audit focuses on is each college's ongoing adherence to the Credentials Framework. Thus, a large part of quality assurance in Ontario is concerned with colleges' ongoing adherence to the outcomes expressed in the Credentials Framework. The OCQAS has integrated and oversees both the program- (CVS) and institutional-level (PQAPA) quality assurance functions.

Working within the landscape imposed by the Credentials Framework and the Minister's Binding Policy Directive for Programs of Instruction poses a number of challenges for OCQAS. For one, the fact that the framework is in the hands of the government, it is not as responsive as it would be if it were it in the hands of the colleges. Any changes that students or employers might require would need to be vetted and approved by the ministry and issued officially through either new legislation or policy directives. While this approach is not without benefits, it poses a problem for the college system, which was established to provide vocationally-oriented programs that meet market demands. In order to do so, colleges must be nimble. However, working within a government-established framework does not allow them to be as flexible and responsive as they might be otherwise.

Challenges

Government: Friend, Ally or Rival?

Since its inception, the OCQAS has always enjoyed a cordial working relationship with staff from the Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU). However, a number of challenges have presented themselves over time. Chief among these is a fundamental difference in the way that the two organizations perceive quality and accountability in the college system. In addition, the OCQAS has not always had the resources to develop and build relationships with both government staff and college stakeholders in parallel; instead, we have focused on our relationships with college stakeholders.

The OCQAS is, in all aspects of its operations, committed to an outcomes-based model of credentialing and quality assurance. Whereas outcomes look at what students have achieved and are able to accomplish upon graduating, inputs look at what goes into achieving the outcomes. The quality assurance and continuous improvement model used by the OCQAS does not assess inputs; it examines whether

institutions have policies and procedures in place (i.e. inputs) that allow the achievement of outcomes. This is not compatible with the input-based approach favoured by government, which looks at contact hours, program duration, laboratory hours, etc. In the case of government, this perspective is understandable: accountability for public funds is a major concern, especially in the climate of fiscal constraints that we have experienced over the past years.

It is also worth mentioning the fact that the outcomes-based approach mandated for use by OCQAS is not altogether consistent with the inputs-based methodologies used elsewhere in Ontario's postsecondary education sector. This difference in approaches has led to an unusual paradox: the government that developed and mandated the outcomes-based credentials framework for colleges is sometimes hard-pressed in seeing OCQAS' approach as credible. It is no surprise that there is a "disconnect" between contact hours and the achievement of outcomes by students. Every program has different needs. So does every community across the province of Ontario. Some programs require more practical training, whereas others require students to work independently or in groups to complete assignments. Students enrolled in hairstyling or dental hygiene programs, for example, will need more hands-on training focusing on skill development, than do students in human resources or advertising programs. Similarly, students in graphic design programs need greater access to specific technological resources; students in culinary programs may need less.

The outcomes-based approach should take these factors into consideration. In parallel, it should consider the fact that, provided that graduates are reliably able to achieve the outcome, how a program is delivered is not relevant. Delivery includes curriculum, contact hours, duration, practicum, etc. In Ontario's colleges, the achievement of outcomes is assured through the PQAPA process. If it is determined through internal and/or external quality assurance processes that students are not achieving the expected outcomes, changes must be made. To this end, the government collects and publishes key performance indicators (KPIs). These look, among other things, at graduation rates, employment rates, employer satisfaction, student satisfaction, etc¹. The data goes to the college and the program level. KPIs are used by the colleges to inform decisions around programming and program reviews, and by government to validate its decision-making.

The roles and responsibilities around how colleges in Ontario operate are set out in the legislative and regulatory frameworks that govern the colleges. Yet, by seeking

¹ An "Employment Profile" is published annually by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities and includes this data on a program-by-program level.

<http://www.tcu.gov.on.ca/pepg/audiences/colleges/serials/eprofile09-10/profile10.pdf>

specific details around inputs and not approving programs based on the inputs, the government continues to appear reluctant to follow its own legislation.

The OCQAS is partially to blame for this. We have fostered our relationships with our client colleges, where we have helped in the creation of a quality culture. However, we have not had the resources to build and strengthen similar relationships with our partners in government.

This could risk the perception that OCQAS' role is to advocate on behalf of the colleges. We should make clear however, that we are advocating not for the colleges, but for the service that we have provided: a proposed program that meets the requirements of the Credentials Framework, is consistent with the mandate of the college system to provide programs in vocational areas, has received recognition or accreditation from a third party, and whose curriculum would reasonably allow graduates to achieve the program-level learning outcomes.

The tension between these roles was discussed in detail in an external review of the OCQAS undertaken in 2010 by a team chaired by Dr. John Randall:

On the one hand, the CVS is seen by the Ministry as a gateway, thus it has a compliance function. On the other hand, the colleges see CVS as having a consultancy function, in that it offers them advice on the construction of their proposals. The perception of CVS as a consultancy service extends largely to the quality assurance professionals within colleges. Beyond them, faculty are more likely to perceive CVS as a gatekeeper, whose requirements must be met. On the other side, the Ministry can perceive CVS as an advocate for the colleges. It would be more accurate to see CVS as an advocate for programme proposals which have satisfied the standards laid down for approval, which is rather different, and is not inconsistent with a gatekeeper role. (Randall et al., 2010)

To address this tension, the OCQAS Management Board is developing a government communication strategy aimed at staff and management. We will familiarize the management-level at government with the OCQAS process at both the program and the institution levels. Staff will be shown the degree of rigour that is used in all of our processes, through a series of information and training sessions. To this end, the OCQAS has developed an interactive, clickable infographic showing the timelines, roles and responsibilities and stages in the PQAPA process.

Limitations

Limitations of the Framework Part 1: Stackability of Credentials and Bridging

The document that prescribes the credentials that colleges in Ontario may offer, the Credentials Framework, presents the credentials as a continuum. However, the actual descriptions of these credentials often suggest otherwise.

A number of college credentials are required to have open admission (MTCU, 2004a). This inhibits the colleges' ability to offer a number of short programs with a narrow range of skills at higher levels. It also limits what can be considered bridging programs. Similarly, there is no clear indication to students and employers what level a particular credential is being offered at. For instance, a short certificate (with a typical duration of 200 to 500 hours) could be academic upgrading, bridging from college to university, a program in tractor-trailer driver training, a course in IT project management for IT professionals, or a training course to use a particular machine for doctoral researchers. As it currently stands, colleges have only one short certificate to offer for all these programs.

Other jurisdictions, most notably Australia, have added levels to their respective qualifications framework (Australian Qualifications Framework Council, 2013). If Ontario were to follow this lead, it could provide greater clarity for employers and students, and it could greatly increase the number of international students admitted by the colleges because they could come for much shorter and/or specialized programs. It would also indicate to prospective students that, while a program might be of a shorter duration, it is at the level of a baccalaureate degree. Currently, colleges are inclined to offer Ontario College Graduate Certificates to an increasing number of graduates of college and university programs. However, in many cases, these programs are longer than they need to be, especially when employers are seeking a narrow set of knowledge and skills. Shorter programs would allow colleges to be more responsive still to the demands of the labour market. Another result would be less cost to students and a government that is already fiscally challenged.

If levels were added to the Credentials Framework, it would be clearer from the outset what the curriculum would include and how much is expected of graduates. It would also make the question of admission standards much clearer. Currently, Local Board Certificate programs have admission standards that are locally determined. However, because they are positioned at a lower point on the credentials continuum, they are less enticing to prospective students than those at the graduate certificate level. Longer certificates (the Ontario College Certificate and the Ontario College Graduate Certificate) have their own issues with regard to admissions: the Ontario College Certificate is mandated to have open admission from secondary school and also be available to 'mature students' – those 19 years of age or older who do not possess the secondary school qualifications or diploma; entrants into programs at the Ontario College Graduate Certificate must have either a college diploma or a baccalaureate degree (MTCU, 2004a). This credential is mandated to be at a higher level than a diploma. However, in many cases, colleges are seeking to deliver diploma-level programs in a shorter amount of time to graduates of other college

diploma and university baccalaureate programs with limited affinity. A certificate program at a diploma level would facilitate this and fill an identified need.

When it was drafted, the Credentials Framework was modeled after the Australian Qualifications Framework. Since that time, it has not been reviewed. The OCQAS has repeatedly tried to engage government in a review, but enthusiasm has been limited. Potential next steps could be to assemble a working group of college representatives and government staff to explore options for reviewing and revising the Credentials Framework and apply some changes similar to those in Australia. As it currently stands, colleges and the OCQAS are both working as effectively as possible with the tools that are available to them.

Limitations of the Framework Part 2: Three years for a degree, three years for a diploma?

Ontario is one of the only jurisdictions in the world to offer a three-year, vocationally-focused diploma. This diploma is offered in parallel with the typical two-year diploma. The credential, called an Ontario College Advanced Diploma, offers students the opportunity to increase the depth and/or the breadth of their knowledge and skills. However, the three year diploma poses its own set of problems. The first is recognition by employers, many of whom are not aware of this credential's existence. Those who do know that it exists are often not able to express clearly the different expectations of graduates of three versus two year diploma programs. Secondly, because it is unique to Ontario, it is likely to be neither properly recognized nor understood nationally within Canada, or internationally. Finally, it is inconsistent with the international trend toward three-year baccalaureate degrees, regardless of the type of institution awarding the credential.

It is rare to have a three-year postsecondary credential that is not a degree: Ontario is the only jurisdiction in North America, and possibly the world to offer a three-year diploma. The single biggest challenge facing this credential is its very existence alongside three-year baccalaureate degrees. It is reasonable to assume that a graduate with a "degree" will be seen as better positioned than one with a "diploma". Moreover, a thorough comparison of the credential-level expectations and outcomes of the two credentials (OCAD and 3-year BA) did not reveal any significant differences apart from the obvious: the three-year diplomas are in applied (vocational) areas, whereas three-year baccalaureate degrees tend towards being research degrees. This distinction, however, is not a valid reason to have separate nomenclature for the two credentials, given that the level, scope, breadth and depth of the expectations are consistent with those of a three-year baccalaureate degree. Similarly, in Ontario there is a distinction between four-year research-focused degrees, and four-year degrees in

applied areas (MTCU, 2009). Three year degrees, whether they are research-based or applied, are the norm internationally, most notably in the Bologna area. Indeed, in the Netherlands, Germany and Ireland, a substantial proportion of students are enrolled in three-year degree programs in technical institutes (Skolnik, 2012). There is no reason that this should be different in Ontario.

In the summer of 2012, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities undertook a province-wide consultation on the future of postsecondary education in Ontario. One of the more important pieces that came out of this exercise was the recommendation that colleges be allowed to offer three-year baccalaureate degrees, in the place of three-year advanced diploma programs. The paper concluded that “these changes in credentials would enable the colleges to more effectively fulfill their mandate of helping to develop the skilled workforce that is needed to make the Ontario economy productive and competitive, and helping residents of Ontario realize their potential” (Skolnik, 2012).

The OCQAS would welcome this change to the system of credentials offered in Ontario, and would support further research into the transition. While there are certainly major implications to our operations, it would bring Ontario’s colleges in line with their international peers; it would allow colleges to be more responsive to labour market demands; and, it would support student achievement of learning outcomes at a level commensurate with these expectations.

Conclusion, discussion and implications

In this paper, we have addressed a number of issues that we have identified in the 8 years since the OCQAS began operations in 2005. As we move forward to an accreditation model for the 2015-16 academic year, it will be increasingly important that these issues be addressed, and addressed proactively. To improve perception by government, the OCQAS Management Board is currently developing a government communication strategy to work both at the management and the staff level. At the core of this strategy should be transparent communications, information sharing, and, if needed, training of government staff in how the OCQAS conducts business.

We also discussed the limitations of the Credentials Framework as it relates to a two-dimensional view to credentials offered by colleges in Ontario. Based on informal conversations with college faculty and administration, there is a desire at least to review, if not to revise the Credentials Framework. The OCQAS will explore this undertaking in the coming months. We hope to assemble an expert working group with membership from both colleges and government to review the Credentials Framework and determine whether there is a need to review it.

In the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities’ province-wide

consultation on the future of postsecondary education in Ontario, one of the more important pieces was the recommendation that colleges be allowed to offer three-year baccalaureate degrees, possibly in the place of three-year advanced diploma programs. If it is determined that the provincial policies will move in this direction, there are major implications for the OCQAS, which would likely be tasked with the quality assurance of these programs. However, given that three-year diplomas are not found in other jurisdictions, this move would make sense. The OCQAS will support it in whatever capacity is possible.

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