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Counting Our Way Up: Centres for Teaching and Learning in the Audit Culture

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All across Canada, provincial governments and external agencies are requiring post-secondary institutions to provide more and more evidence of accountability, transparency, and intentionality behind decision-making. Although these requests are intended to promote effectiveness and the proper use of resources, the growing demand for evidence of efficiency has led to a “mania of constant assessment” (Collini, 2010), affecting the work of stakeholders at every level of the university, including directors and educational developers in centres for teaching and learning (CTLs).

Efforts to comply with the accountability demand has required significant time and energy devoted to the processes of the audit, rather than the substance of activities, detracting from the purposes of accountability in the first place: to enhance quality (Apple, 2005; Craig et al., Power, 1994). The result of this ‘audit culture’ is punitive: it has reduced the complex social practices of higher education to numbers, eroding trust, dismantling collegiality, limiting creativity, all in favour of quantifiable output (Craig et al., 2014; Shore, 2008; Tsoukas, 1997).

The purpose of this study was to explore how the audit culture has impacted the work of educational developers at post-secondary institutions across Canada, capturing individual perceptions around accountability, data collection, and reporting processes.

Survey participants included 53 educational developers, centre directors, and faculty from across six provinces; and interview participants included six educational developers from across five provinces. Nearly all participants identified that they were engaged – to some extent – in auditing and data collection and reporting activities – whether mandated by external agencies and government bodies, or self-driven to improve efficiencies, demonstrate impact, and communicate budgetary needs and concerns to administrations. Commonly identified data types included attendance numbers, participant feedback scores, program offerings, consultations, and numbers of curriculum maps, high impact practices, and experiential learning opportunities.

The majority of participants believed that the use of numbers or metrics alone cannot accurately reflect or demonstrate the value and impact of educational development activities and should not be used to measure an institution’s teaching and learning quality. However, they also noted that collecting more robust data types (i.e., qualitative data) and measuring impact over time is difficult as CTLs are increasingly strapped with budgetary constraints, less resources, and growing demands for accountability, in the form or accountancy, from external sources. Additionally, many found that their identity and their positionality within the institution (i.e., as staff members, or assuming positions with little perceived power) inhibited their ability to resist accountability demands.

Participants provided recommendations for further interventions, including a holistic approach to data collection, allocating time and energies to reporting purposes, consulting with external agencies to better define goals and purposes of data demands, and most critically, maintaining key values of educational development (i.e., the holistic development of teaching quality and student learning) as they work to meet accountability demands.

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