

Conceptions of Quality and Approaches to Quality Assurance in Ontario's Universities

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## Abstract

Many international, political, and economic influences led to increased demands for development of new quality assurance systems for universities. Like many policies and processes that aim to assure quality, Ontario's Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) did not define *quality*. This study sought to explore conceptions of quality and approaches to quality assurance used within Ontario's universities. A document analysis of the QAF's rationale and structure suggested that quality was conceived primarily as fitness for purpose, while suggested indicators represented an exceptional conception of quality. Ontario universities perpetuated such confusion by adopting the framework without customizing it to their institutional conceptions of quality. Drawing upon phenomenographic traditions, a qualitative investigation was conducted to better understand various conceptions of quality held by university administrators and to appreciate ways in which they implemented the QAF. Three main approaches to quality assurance were identified: (a) Defending Quality, characterized by conceptions of quality as exceptional, which focuses on administrative accountability and uses a hands-off strategy to defend traditional notions of quality inputs and resources; (b) Demonstrating Quality, characterized by conceptions of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money, which focuses on accountability to students and uses centralized engaged strategies to demonstrate how programs meet current priorities and intended outcomes; and (c) Enhancing Quality, characterized by conceptions of quality as transformation, which focuses on reflection and learning experience and uses engaged strategies to find new ways of improving learning and teaching. The development of a campus culture that values the institution's function in student learning and quality teaching would benefit

from Enhancing Quality approaches to quality assurance. This would require holistic consideration of the beliefs held by members of the institution, a clear articulation of the institution's conceptions of quality, and a critical analysis of how these conceptions align with institutional practices and policies.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

CBCA	Canadian Business and Current Affairs
COU	Council of Ontario Universities
DLE	Degree Level Expectations
EQAO	Education Quality and Accountability Office
ERC	Education Resource Center
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
GUDLE	Graduate University Degree Level Expectations
HEQCO	Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
ICT	Information and communications technology
IQAP	Institutional Quality Assurance Process
K-12	Kindergarten to Grade 12
MTCU	Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities
OCAV	Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents
OCGS	Ontario Council of Graduate Studies
OUCQA	Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance
Quality Council	Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
QA	Quality Assurance
QAF	Quality Assurance Framework
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
SOAR	Success stories, Opportunities, Aspirations, available resources
UPRAC	Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee
UUDLE	University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The world of academia has seen an emerging priority being placed on the quality of education that students receive from a university (Ewell, 2010; Harvey, 2006, 2007; Knight, 2006; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). There are new interests in creating policies, processes, and cultures to help assure and account for the quality of education that a university student receives (El-Khawas, 2013; Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Van Hout, 2014). Quality assurance policies and processes can be found around the globe as universities in many countries are working towards demonstrating that their university programs are “of quality” and enhancing the quality of university teaching and learning (Knight, 2006; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). Ontario is no exception. In response to many pressures, Ontario universities adopted and implemented a new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) in 2011 (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance [OUCQA], 2010) that has impacted practices and has been changing the focus on what is considered as quality.

Defining quality is actually quite difficult. What exactly is meant by the term *quality* within the context of university education? Not only is its definition often vague or absent from the very documents and policies that purport to assure its existence, quality is also a contested term that takes on different meanings to different stakeholder groups of people (Harvey & Green, 1993; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Van Hout, 2013; Newton, 2002, 2010). To some it might mean exceptional, excellent, or something that is the best. Others may require some measure of perfection or consistency, having limited to no flaw or faults, before the term quality would be considered an appropriate label. Quality could be conceptualized in a value context suggesting that something is of

quality only when it has value for money. Or it might be deemed quality when it fits its purpose. Perhaps to some, elements of transformative ability are necessary for something to be considered to be of quality or have quality. While some work has been done to determine how quality is defined and conceptualized in Europe and Australia (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996, Newton, 2002, 2010), there is a significant gap in the Canadian literature on the conceptions and operational definitions of quality used within a higher education context.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

The purpose of this doctoral work was to explore the conceptions of quality and the approaches to quality assurance at Ontario universities, specifically as they related to policy documents and university administrators who are responsible for implementing the quality assurance processes at their institutions. I aimed to investigate how quality is conceptualized both in text format and from the perspectives of those that have developed and implemented the institutional quality assurance processes.

This study involved an in-depth qualitative investigation that explored two overarching research questions in an Ontario university context:

1. How do quality assurance documents in Ontario's universities attend to the meaning of quality?

In chapter 4, a document analysis approach is used to more specifically analyze the province-wide QAF (OUQCA, 2010) and the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) documents selected from 10 Ontario universities. Using both types of documents, specific questions that guided this research included:

- a) What conceptions or definitions of quality are articulated?

- b) What metrics are suggested for measuring quality in academic programs?
  - c) To what extent do the metrics appropriately reflect or align with the conceptions and definitions of quality in each document?
2. How do university administrators approach quality assurance processes?

In chapter 5, a phenomenographic approach was used to more specifically explore the variety of conceptions held of quality and approaches used to assure quality amongst ten quality assurance administrators. Specific questions that guided this research included:

- a) What is the variety of conceptions of quality that are held by university administrators responsible for implementing quality assurance in Ontario's universities?
- b) What different strategies do university administrators use in implementing the QAF?
- c) Considering conceptions and strategies, what are the varying approaches that university administrators adopt in implementing quality assurance processes?

### **Rationale**

Demands and calls for quality have resulted in new policies, processes, and frameworks that are implemented in an effort to assure the quality of education that a university student receives, impacting universities on local, provincial or state, national, or international levels (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Ewell, 2010; Graham, Franchetto, & Madden, 2013; Harvey, 2006, 2007; Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario [HEQCO], 2013; Rae, 2005).

In Ontario, the provincial government articulated a new vision for Ontario's postsecondary education system:

Ontario's colleges and universities will drive creativity, innovation, knowledge, and community engagement through teaching and research. They will put students first by providing the best possible learning experience for all qualified learners in an affordable and financially sustainable way, ensuring high quality, and globally competitive outcomes for students and Ontario's creative economy. (Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities [MTCU], 2012, p. 7)

Aligned with this vision, the MTCU (2013) has outlined its six priorities, including social and economic development, high-quality educational experience, financial sustainability and accountability, access for all qualified learners, world-class research and innovation, and collaboration and pathways for students. This Differentiation Policy Framework repeatedly emphasizes the importance of a high-quality postsecondary education system, of high-quality teaching, and of a quality experience for Ontario students. Ontario's Ministry adds these calls for high quality to many other political, economic, and international influences that together put the pressure on universities for implementing robust quality assurance processes.

In response to these pressures, Ontario universities are now in the process of implementing the QAF (OUCQA, 2010). This framework was designed by Ontario's universities to show "significant leadership and a firm commitment to cultivating a culture of quality in education" (OUCQA, 2010, p. 1), to develop a process that "is more streamlined, more effective, more transparent, and more publicly accountable" (OUCQA,

2010, p. 1) than earlier quality assurance processes, to bring “Ontario’s universities into line with international quality assurance standards” (OUCQA, 2010, p. 1) and “to facilitate greater international acceptance of our degrees and improve our graduates’ access to university programs and employment worldwide” (OUCQA, 2010, p. 1).

The framework aligns with international quality assurance trends and is reflective of movements that have emerged from the Bologna Process (Bologna Declaration, 1999) throughout Europe. The Bologna Process involves a movement to the development of quality assurance processes within the formation of the European Higher Education Area (Budapest-Vienna Declaration, 2010); currently 47 European member countries have, as part of their mission, a goal to implement and advance quality assurance processes within their universities (see [www.ehea.info](http://www.ehea.info)).

It is clear from the QAF document that during its development much care was taken “to balance the need for accountability with the need to encourage normal curriculum evolution [recognizing that] if quality assurance measures become too onerous or restrictive, they can become impediments rather than facilitators of continuous program improvements” (p. 1). Ultimately, the framework was created to develop and foster a process for “quality *assurance* that produces quality *enhancement*” (OUCQA, 2010, p. 1).

The QAF clearly signifies the importance of quality, yet like many other documents that strive to assure and enhance quality, it does not provide a definition of quality. Without providing a clear definition of what is meant by quality, how this concept is interpreted by those who read and try to implement the framework is likely to vary. It is

important to deepen our understanding of what we mean by quality, especially in contexts where we strive to assure and enhance quality.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This study focused upon university administrators' perceptions and approaches to a particular phenomenon: the implementation of the QAF in Ontario universities. The QAF was analyzed in depth to develop a richer understanding of the meaning of quality in the context of Ontario universities' quality assurance processes. Breadth was explored through the inclusion of the Institutional Quality Assurance Process documents from 10 selected universities.

To foster depth of understanding of administrators' approaches to quality assurance, the scope of the study was limited to conducting in-depth interviews with 10 university administrators responsible for implementing the QAF from seven Ontario universities. Administrators, in the context of this study, included anyone responsible for administering and implementing the quality assurance processes at an institution. This included individuals holding roles such as, but not limited to, Associate Vice-Presidents, Vice-Provosts, Managers of Quality Assurance, Quality Assurance Coordinators or Specialists, or similar positions. In an attempt to recruit individuals with a variety of experiences and to increase the breadth of the study, I selected universities that were diversely distributed in terms of geographical location, student population, age, and type of institution.

This study is not without limitations. By limiting the scope of the study, I may not have recruited individuals who have other perceptions of quality or take different approaches to quality assurance. In fact, I would assume a follow-up study that explores

how university educators—including faculty, sessional staff, and graduate teaching assistants—conceptualize quality may yield different results and likely additional or alternative concepts or approaches, thus I do not assert that my findings here are necessarily generalizable without further research. I would also be very interested in exploring how students conceptualize quality as it relates to their education. I bring my own conceptions of quality and ways of approaching quality assurance into this study, thus it is important to be forthcoming about my own personal ground, beliefs, and assumptions.

### **Personal Ground, Beliefs, and Assumptions**

My undergraduate and early graduate education was in molecular sciences and I had learned to hold positivist and objective views of the world. As I tried to apply these early epistemological beliefs to understanding human beings and their actions and interactions within the world, I was conflicted. While I still believe that there may be some universal laws, I also believe that my concept of the world is the product of my own mind and it may be different from how others view the world. There is a subjective nature to social experiences that is unique and personal to each individual. While there are many instances where humans are conditioned by external circumstances and respond in deterministic ways, each individual has some autonomy and choice in making decisions that can help them to construct and create their own environment. I recognize now that as I learn and experience more in life, my beliefs and assumptions about the world change. When I started my doctoral program, I was sure that I would come to understand the “essence” or true reality of the quality assurance phenomenon and that I would be able to unveil the best approach to quality assurance within the confines of the QAF. As I



engaged in coursework, read and considered much of the literature in this area, and dialogued with my instructors, committee, and colleagues, I found my own perspectives and beliefs were changing. I realized how many differing meanings quality could have and I became fascinated by the notion that formal quality assurance documents do not tend to define quality. I was intrigued why dialogue about the varying meanings of quality had not, to my knowledge, come up in an Ontario context. I anecdotally noticed differences in approaches to quality assurance between my own institution and those of others. In grappling with these ideas and observations, I realized that research in this area would help to fill a gap and could promote these discussions and considerations amongst Ontario quality assurance practitioners.

By the time I proposed my research, I did not believe that I would find one definition of quality that is held by all or agreed upon by all. Instead, I entered the research study assuming that there would be a variety of concepts and perceptions that are held of quality and a variety of approaches that are taken to assuring the quality of university education. I was interested in learning what variations in concepts, perceptions, and approaches existed in an Ontario university context, and I was personally interested in considering how what I was learning as a result of my doctoral studies could impact my job as an educational developer within the teaching and learning centre at McMaster University. Teaching and Learning Centres are central units that provide pedagogical expertise and support in university teaching, teaching development for faculty and graduate students as well as providing consult for course design, curriculum development, and research on teaching and learning. I recently accepted a position as the Manager of Program Enhancement at McMaster University, where a large part of my

work is focused on helping support departments and curriculum committees as they prepare for their program reviews that must be completed under the new requirements of the QAF. I have been actively and practically involved in supporting the implementation of the QAF. I was in a very unique position throughout my doctoral studies where my practical on-the-job experiences with quality assurance informed my interests and helped me to shape my research questions. My doctoral research in turn directly and immediately impacted my own perspectives of and approaches to quality assurance. This provided an incredibly valuable, and perhaps somewhat rare, opportunity where practice continually informed and shaped my research ideas and the research knowledge generated was continually and immediately mobilized into my everyday practice.

### **Outline for the Remainder of the Document**

The journey I have taken throughout my doctoral studies may be apparent to some throughout the remainder of this document. The origins of chapter 2 began as the first manuscript that I wrote as a doctoral student. Starting my studies, I knew that I wanted to study and better understand quality assurance processes in Ontario universities, but I was thinking of it only in how people were accepting it. It was my instructor, the late Dr. Michael Kompf, who encouraged me to explore its history and philosophical foundations. With some initial resistance, I accepted his advice and became invested in trying to understand the many influences that I believed had led to the need for Ontario's universities to develop and adopt the QAF. It was later revised and published as a chapter in *Critical Issues in Higher Education* (Kompf & Denicolo, 2013). Chapter 2 is thus a review of the literature and a description of how I conceptualized the major influences as interacting elements that led to demands for quality assurance.

Chapter 3 continues from the initial literature review and carries on where chapter 2 left off as the QAF was being developed. Chapter 3 also originated as a doctoral course paper and it becomes evident here how my thinking had changed within a short year. I became interested in the meanings of quality, and began exploring the literature that related to concepts and definitions of quality, and in particular the idea and importance of balancing quality assurance for the purpose of accountability with quality assurance for the purpose of continuous enhancement. I found myself becoming a strong and passionate advocate of quality assurance for enhancement purposes and became very engaged with the idea of building an institutional culture that values continuous improvement of teaching, learning, and academic programming.

Chapter 4 describes the document analysis research I conducted with undergraduate student Abeer Siddiqui. In this paper, we conducted an analysis of the QAF, paying particular attention to the ways in which quality is conceptualized and the ways in which it suggests evaluating and measuring quality. The extent of alignment between conceptions of quality and evaluation criteria is discussed and recommendations are made to strengthen this alignment.

Chapter 5 follows with the results of a phenomenographic study that used in-depth interviews with 10 university administrators from seven Ontario universities. Here, I sought to deepen current understandings of how Ontario's university administrators conceptualize quality and how those conceptions of quality relate to the strategies they use in implementing quality assurance processes. By investigating their conceptions and strategies through a phenomenographic methodology, it became evident that a range of

approaches to QA existed. These approaches are discussed, in relation to existing literature, in chapter 5.

Finally, chapter 6 offers a summary and conclusion of the research study, including recommendations that I make based on the results and current literature. In this chapter I also provide an account of how I have been able to act upon some of these recommendations in the practical context of my job at McMaster University, thus mobilizing knowledge generated from this study into practice. Integrating my doctoral research together with my workplace practices has been a tremendous benefit to closing the loop between research and practice, whereby my practical experiences informed and motivated my research questions, and some of my research findings were mobilized promptly into practical action.

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## CHAPTER TWO: SHAPING ONTARIO'S QUALITY

### ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK<sup>1</sup>

Currently, there is a trend toward massification of higher education, whereby a greater proportion of the population is enrolling in studies beyond high school. Canadian universities are now serving more than 1 million full- and part-time students and this number is expected to continue to increase (Statistics Canada, 2010). How is it possible, then, to maintain, enhance, and assure quality of university education when we are faced with increasing student enrolments without corresponding increases in faculty, space, government funding, and other necessary instructional resources?

These trends and questions have, in part, raised an awareness of the importance of determining and assessing the quality of university education in Ontario, in Canada, and worldwide. Quality assurance processes have been adopted in universities around the world; Europe, Australia, and Asia are leaders in higher education quality assurance, with North America following closely behind (Gibbs, Knapper, & Piccinin, 2008; Knight, 2006). The internationalization of higher education, along with media and public demand, has put pressure on finding a method to compare and contrast the variety of qualifications granted by academic institutions for credit transfer, graduate study preparation, and professional qualification. In addition, programs of study and modes of delivery continue to increase in complexity, variety, and quantity. This has led Ontario universities to recognize a need for articulating degree level expectations and learning outcomes in

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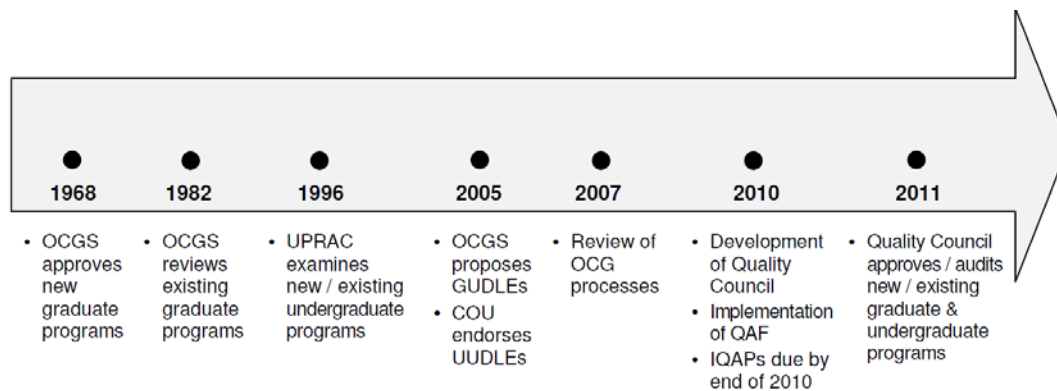
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undergraduate and graduate programs. In 2011, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) implemented a Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) that will impact the process of all new program approvals and cyclical program reviews in both undergraduate and graduate programs at publicly assisted universities in Ontario. Implementation of the new QAF replaces the current program approval and cyclical review processes mandated by the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (OCGS) and the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC).

In order to critique these new quality assurance requirements for Ontario universities, we not only must understand them in detail but also recognize the influences that have created a demand for quality assurance. Thus, in this chapter, I first review the history of quality assurance of university education in Ontario, outlining the major developments and the key players who have shaped the new QAF that all publicly assisted universities will henceforth follow. Next, I explore how political, economic, international, technological, media, and social influences have led to the publicly accepted idea that quality assurance is both necessary and beneficial in Ontario universities. Finally, I propose a conceptual model of these influences, showing how they overlap and have interacted with one another to shape the QAF that Ontario universities adopted in 2010.

### **History of Quality Assurance in Ontario**

University quality assurance in Ontario increasingly has become a priority. As shown in Figure 1, external appraisals of new graduate programs became mandatory in 1968 and by 1982 graduate programs began undergoing periodic external appraisals through the OCGS. In 1996, the COU adopted procedures for auditing undergraduate programs, to be conducted by the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC).



*Figure 1.* Brief historical summary of quality assurance in Ontario universities.

In 2005, the OCGS prepared a statement of Graduate University Degree Level Expectations (GUDLEs), while the COU endorsed the guidelines developed by the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UUDLEs). In 2005, the OCGS prepared a statement of Graduate University Degree Level Expectations (GUDLEs), while the COU endorsed the guidelines developed by the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) for University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UUDLEs). The Executive Heads of Ontario Universities commissioned a review of OCGS's appraisal processes and operations in 2007. As a result of this review, a Quality Assurance Transition/Implementation Task Force developed the new Quality Assurance Framework which was approved by the Executive Heads in 2010 (OUCQA, 2010, p. 29). The Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA, also known as the Quality Council) was subsequently formed and operates at arm's length both government and from universities. "OCAV fully acknowledges that academic standards, quality assurance and program improvement are, in the first instance, the responsibility of universities themselves. This Framework recognizes the institution's autonomy to determine priorities for funding, space, and faculty allocation" (OUCQA, 2010, p. 2).

Under the QAF approved in April 2010, each publicly assisted university in Ontario will develop and implement an Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) that is consistent with its respective mission statement and degree level expectations. The IQAP is subject to the approval of the Quality Council.

The QAF further comprises four components:

- Protocol for new graduate and undergraduate program approvals;

- Protocol for expedited approvals for major substantive changes that are made to existing and previously approved programs;
- Protocol for the Cyclical Review of Existing Programs to secure academic standards of existing programs and to assure ongoing improvement; and
- An Audit Process to examine each institution's compliance with its own IQAP for the Cyclical Review of Existing Programs.

Each university will need to clearly articulate program requirements and associated learning outcomes (section 2.1.1) and demonstrate how these align with the institution's own undergraduate or graduate degree level expectations. New program approvals and cyclical reviews of existing programs will need to demonstrate appropriateness of proposed modes of delivery (section 2.1.5) for the assessment of student achievement of the intended learning outcomes and degree level expectations. Assessment methods and demonstration of level of student performance (section 2.1.6) also need to reflect the institution's statement of degree level expectations.

Essentially the QAF necessitates that departments articulate learning outcomes for their respective programs that are consistent with the university's mission, values, goals, and strengths, while conforming with the UUDLEs or GUDLEs. In addition, there is a need to justify the instructional strategies used throughout the programs and to demonstrate and provide evidence that students are meeting the learning outcomes as a result of the programs' instructional strategies and modes of delivery.

### **Need for Quality Assurance in Ontario Universities**

Many trends and influences have led to the publicly held belief that quality assurance is both necessary and beneficial in Ontario universities. To shed light on some of

these elements, I conducted a literature review using ERIC, ERC, and CBCA academic databases for recent literature on quality assurance and accountability in higher education. In addition, I accessed numerous websites developed by associations and councils involved in higher education and quality assurance in Ontario and in Canada, seeking policy documents that have been developed for the purpose of assuring quality, both in Canada and internationally. As a result of my investigation, I determined the following significant areas of influence: political, economic, media, international, technological, and social. After exploring each of these influences in detail, I constructed a model depicting the forces that have shaped quality assurance, which is presented later in this chapter.

### **Political Influences**

In Canada, the power to enact education-related laws is accorded to the provinces under Section 93 of the *Constitution Act* (1867), which allows provinces to legislate postsecondary education and gives them the responsibility to provide operational funding to postsecondary institutions. Historically, this has been accomplished with the financial support of the federal government; however, over the past 15 years, there has been a change in governments' role in higher education. Reviewing recent trends, Shanahan and Jones (2007) showed that Canadian federal government has reduced its funding support in the education sector, supported privatization of skills training programs, increased funding of marketable research initiatives that involve private partnerships, and increased financial assistance for targeted groups of students at the expense of universal aid programs. The provinces responded by adding new programs and options that enable students to obtain degrees, which effectually increases institutional diversity. The province of Ontario began using fiscal strategies that employ market mechanisms and

principles to allocate resources, generate revenues, partially deregulate tuition, and address accessibility and accountability. Due to the massive expansion of postsecondary education, there now is an increasing focus in Ontario on a direct accountability relationship between the individual postsecondary institution and government.

Currently, a large proportion of Ontario's work-age population has acquired a postsecondary education; however, in March 2010, Ontario premier Dalton McGuinty introduced the province's Open Ontario Plan in a Speech from the Throne (March 8, 2010), which aims to increase the postsecondary education rate from the current 62% to 70%. Furthermore, the plan seeks to create a new Ontario Online Institute to offer home-based study options and also aims to increase international enrolment by 50%. These political goals are indicative of a market-driven economy that commodifies higher education—a neoliberalist approach to economic and social policy that is further discussed in the "Economic Influences" section of this chapter.

The COU, which is composed of two representatives from each university (the institution's president and another member appointed by the senior academic governing body), released a media statement indicating that Ontario universities are up to the task of tackling the McGuinty government's ambitious goals of increasing domestic and international enrolment and working towards ensuring that 70% of the province's population obtains higher education (COU, 2010). In its 2009 submission to government, *Reaching Even Higher: The Next Multi-Year Funding Plan for Postsecondary Education*, the COU noted that realizing such goals would confer an educational advantage in the world and would help to develop our knowledge capital. The COU agrees that jobs evolve along with the knowledge economy and that Ontario universities are well placed

to provide people with the skills to successfully leverage this evolution. The *Reaching Even Higher* submission outlines three recommendations that would allow universities to meet the province's goals:

- Transformation of accountability agreements into strategic agreements that build on each institution's mission and strengths, regional needs, and provincial goals.
- Increase of base operating grants (of \$1 billion over 5 years) and increased investments in new capital to accommodate desired growth and support greater access.
- Further increase of base funding to allow new investments in quality in order to improve retention and graduation rates, students' experience and engagement, and teaching and learning outcomes.

Essentially, Ontario universities are willing to increase enrolment in exchange for a greater emphasis on institutional versus government-mandated accountability and for increased government funding. As Immerwahr, Johnson, and Gasbarra (2008) report, universities see a need for quality assurance that is controlled largely by the universities themselves but they fear that without additional funding, higher education institutions will become less accessible to students and that cutting costs will either lead to diminished quality, diminished access, or both. It seems reasonable then that Ontario universities are willing to accept a wider range of students on the condition of additional government assistance.

The transfer of accountability to strategic agreements recommended by the COU is aligned with the COU's recently endorsed QAF that underscores the need for institutions to create their own internal process for assuring quality that reflects their own



missions and strengths, but also reflects regional needs and provincial goals. The COU's recommendation to Ontario identifies alignment of the IQAP with a university's own missions and strengths as the first priority, which would allow most of the quality assurance control to rest with the university itself.

With the push for higher enrolment, universities will need to respond by providing greater diversity in their programming options (Côté & Allahar, 2007). This increased diversity, in turn, is prompting a call for standardization, evaluation, and quality assurance, but Ontario universities are resisting government-controlled standardization, accountability, and evaluation and instead are moving towards university-centred assurance policies that align with their respective missions and strengths.

Still, the fact that governments are pushing for accountability in education does not suggest it is strictly a political strategy. As I will show, the move towards quality assurance and accountability is quite complicated and involves other influences.

### **Economic Influences**

It is impossible to separate political influences from economic influences since both are currently intertwined in a neoliberal society. Neoliberalism as a philosophy holds that a combination of free markets, free trade, and the free flow of capital is the most efficient way to produce the greatest social, political, and economic good. David Harvey (2007) defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). Neoliberals argue for reduced taxation, reduced regulation, and minimal government involvement in the economy. This includes the privatization of

health, education, and social welfare, dismantling of trade unions, and the general opening up of the economy to privatization and foreign competition.

Universities today are emulating corporate practices and directives. Johnson, Kavanagh, and Mattson (2003) point out that many universities in the United States now see the potential for profit, import managerial techniques from corporations, use a more temporary workforce of sessional and adjunct professors to reduce costs, and recruit more students through online learning programs. Following a different model than the typical North American university, the private and for-profit University of Phoenix aims to offer only those programs in fields where there is high marketplace demand. According to Cox (2003), the University of Phoenix allows companies to tailor programs and curriculum to meet their own needs, thus ensuring continued tuition support that employers offer employees to continue their education. University of Phoenix CEO John Sterling argues that the university does “every bit as much education as the Greek system that served as the model for the modern university. Greek educators prepared people for life. We prepare people for a life of work” (as cited in Cox, 2003, p. 23).

Steve Ruch of the DeVry Institute agrees that students are not choosing to attend universities for the traditional, abstract notion of learning for its own sake; rather, many students are choosing to attend university because they have been led to believe, through parents, media, teachers, and the government, that a university degree is the ticket for success. As students are required to pay higher tuition fees, they expect universities to provide the services that they demand in the market: better service, lower price, higher quality, and a variety of products that satisfies their own sense of good education (McLoughlin & Visser, 2003) and give them better job and income opportunities.

Whether students attend for-profit or not-for-profit universities, Côté and Allahar (2007) and Cox (2003) suggest that both types of institutions share the same values—essentially that money is the measure of one's life success. These values help strengthen the idea that university education is a marketable product, a concept that is turning higher education into job training institutions, especially in the for-profit sector (Hedges, 2009).

Canadian universities are publicly assisted, but they too needed to generate additional revenue when federal cutbacks left the provinces with much less funding for postsecondary education in the 1990s (Shanahan & Jones, 2007). While faculty employment and student enrolment rates have been rising in Canadian universities (18% and 56% growth, respectively, between 1987 and 2006), the funding per student has dropped from \$21,000 in the early 1980s to \$15,000 in 2006-2007 (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 2007, 2008). To replace this money, universities were encouraged and have sought to become more like corporations in all of their research, teaching, and governance activities. Polster (2006, 2008) explains that this corporatization process continues to be promoted and justified on the grounds that it would enhance universities' contribution to national economic competitiveness and that it would help them address higher learning more effectively and efficiently. Increasingly more money is being spent on advertising and branding to attract academics with large research grants and to attract more domestic and especially international students as a way of generating revenue. At the same time, increasingly less money is spent on promoting teacher development, supporting research activity, and keeping tuition fees affordable. Essentially, as Polster argues, universities are progressively diverting funds from their core operations to the corporate activities that manage and promote them. Still,

there exists a belief that acquiring postsecondary education is necessary for achieving economic and professional success, which increases students' (and parents') demand for postsecondary education.

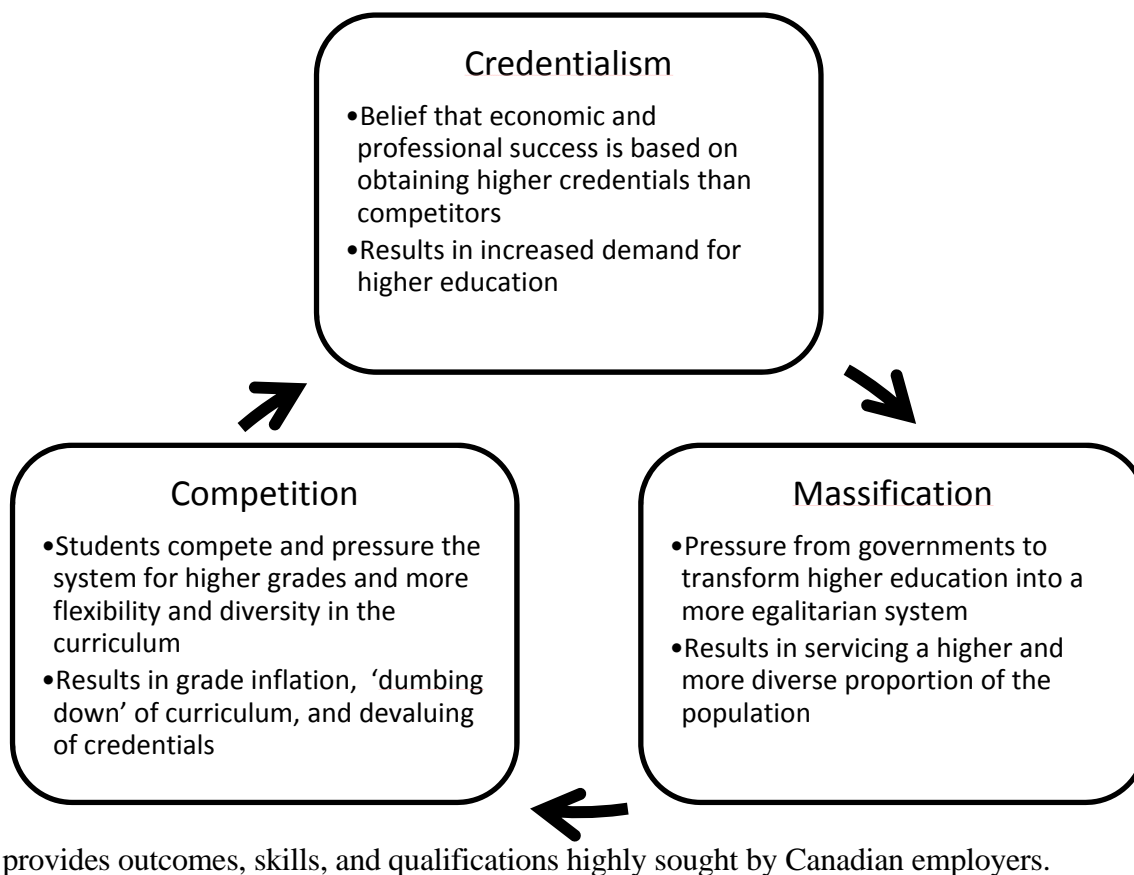
This greater demand pressures government to increase accessibility to higher education, creating a trend towards massification that is defined by Altbach (2010) as the process by which academic systems enrol large numbers and higher proportions of students. The North American higher education system experienced mass access beginning as early as the 1920s. Altbach shows that no country is immune now from massification. He posits that this epidemic fosters new types of higher education institutions, an increased emphasis on online or distance learning, greater administrative forces and managerialization, and an increased diversity of students and student culture. Massification transforms the exclusive and elite higher education system into a more egalitarian system that services a significantly higher and more diverse proportion of the population. Universities respond to the greater demand and higher enrolment by creating additional programs and adapting the curriculum to accommodate the diverse cohort of students that are accepted to postsecondary programs (Canadian Council on Learning [CCL], 2009).

Côté and Allahar (2007) argue that the larger number of high school applicants to postsecondary education institutions pressures universities and colleges to adjust their entry requirements in order to limit the number of entries based on space and resources available. Higher grade requirements (published annually in *Maclean's* and *The Globe and Mail's* university-ranking reports) create competition among students who then pressure their teachers and professors to give them higher grades to secure admission to university. But as more individuals with postsecondary education enter the job market,

employers prefer those with higher credentials, essentially devaluing the lower level credentials. Consequently, more students graduating from postsecondary institutions apply to postgraduate and professional programs in an attempt to bypass what Côté and Allahar call the bottleneck of individuals with mere bachelor's degrees. This strengthens the belief that achieving economic and professional success requires more education and leads to what I see as a cycle from which it is difficult to escape (Figure 2).

In addition to competition between students, universities also have become more competitive. Students are increasingly conceptualized as consumers whom universities need to attract through various marketing campaigns. Students compare universities to choose one that will provide the best possible education they can purchase to ensure a successful future. This market-driven concept of education in turn drives government, corporations, media, parents, and students to evaluate and compare universities and their programs not only to help consumers (i.e., students) purchase a product (i.e., educational program), but also to ensure that the product that they purchase has value.

Education, in this view, is measured as a production function, with a primary efficiency rationale towards ensuring a well-prepared workforce, as Egan (1992) explains using an analogy depicting schools as factories that turn out units prepared to work in society. As such, students are individual entrepreneurial consumers of higher education who need comparable information to ensure they are informed consumers maximizing their investment. Corporations push for accountability to show students with degrees can meet performance standards that are necessary for functioning in their respective industries. Even the CCL (2009) suggests that a quality postsecondary system might be one that attracts and retains large numbers of students from a range of backgrounds and shows that it meets and



*Figure 2.* Conceptualized cycle showing relationship of enrolment, grades, and credentials.

## Media Influences

University performance and quality is often assessed through public media mechanisms such as *Maclean's* magazine's annual rankings and *The Globe and Mail's* online survey of students. These rankings typically are considered league tables that are compiled and arranged on the basis of some set of performance indicators designed specifically to compare institutions to each other. League tables were originally created by Bob Morse at *U.S. News & World Report* in the early 1980s as charts that compare universities; today they typically are produced by commercial publishing enterprises to meet a perceived market need for transparent, comparative data about educational institutions (Usher & Savino, 2006). *Maclean's* began comparing Canadian universities in its inaugural university ranking issue in 1991, which was met with a mixture of public enthusiasm and institutional unease. Since then, *Maclean's* continues its mandate to provide essential information in a comprehensive package to help students choose the university that best suits their needs and strives to offer an overview of the quality of instruction and services available to students at public universities in Canada (Dwyer, 2009).

Critics have argued that the *Maclean's* index, which normalizes each component in the ranking, exaggerates typically very small interuniversity differences (Shale & Liu, 2002; Tossutti, 2002); others (e.g., Page, 2001) have identified inconsistencies and problems with how the rank data is interpreted. Kong and Veall (2005) analysed the entrance grades and enrolment demand in relation to universities' improvements in the *Maclean's* rankings between 1992 and 2004. Overall, Kong and Veall found no evidence that the *Maclean's* rankings had an effect on universities, on potential students' enrolment share, or on the entering class's high school average (a minor exception existed for

Medical-Doctoral schools, where an improvement of one rank in the *Maclean's* ranking system was associated with an estimated 0.3% improvement in the entering-class average).

League tables have caused institutional unease because they use weighted aggregates of some set of indicators to arrive at a single, all-encompassing quality score that allows institutions to be ranked and compared to one another (Usher & Savino, 2006). The indicators themselves (and the importance assigned to them) are subjective and can change from year to year or from country to country. According to Usher and Savino (2006), Canada is not the only country that engages in university comparisons: National-level rankings are also published in Australia (by the Melbourne Institute); China and Hong Kong (*Education18*); Germany (CHE/DAAD); Italy (*La Repubblica*); Poland (the *Rzeczpospolita*); Spain (*Excelencia*); the United Kingdom (the *Times* and the *Guardian*); and in the United States (*U.S. News & World Report* and the *Washington Monthly*). Global institutional ranking systems are a new variation on national rankings and at present include Shanghai's Jiao Tong University's Academic Ranking of World Universities and the U.K. *Times Higher Education Supplement's* World University Rankings, first released in 2003 and 2004, respectively.

Interestingly, there is no agreement among authors of league tables and indicators as to what indicates quality. Global academic ranking systems have little relation to one another as they use different indicators and weightings to arrive at a measure of quality, yet the media continue to report such comparisons that are often taken at face value by the general public. Popular ranking systems and league tables, available to the general public, create an increased demand for additional quality assurance measures to ensure that university programs are equally valuable between institutions.



## **International Influences**

Globalization has had a profound influence on higher education. Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley (2009), distinguishing between globalization and internationalization of higher education, define globalization as the reality that is shaped by an increasingly integrated world economy, new information and communications technology (ICT), the emergence of an international knowledge network, the role of the English language as the dominant language of scientific communication, and other forces beyond the control of academic institutions. They define internationalization as the variety of policies and programs that universities and governments implement in response to globalization (e.g., study-abroad programs, inter-institutional partnerships, and overseas branch campuses). This academic internationalization trend has been stimulated by a need to generate funds or profits by increasing revenues from domestic and high-fee international tuitions. In addition, Altbach and Knight (2007) suggest that internationalization has also occurred in an attempt to provide greater access in response to public demand, to enhance competitiveness and prestige through traditional campus-based internationalization initiatives (student-abroad programs, international studies majors, foreign-language instruction, and sponsorship of foreign students), and to align with the European Union's Bologna Process system in an effort to allow mobility.

The Bologna Process began as a declaration made in 1999 by the Ministers of Education from 29 European countries. The declaration commits governments "to consolidate the European area of higher education" within a framework of "institutional competences and taking full respect of the diversity of cultures, languages, national education systems and of University autonomy" (Bologna Declaration, 1999, p. 4).

Essentially, member countries agreed to adopt a system of recognizable and comparable degrees; to establish a system of transferable credits; to allow for student, teacher, and researcher mobility between institutions within and between European countries; and to promote European co-operation in quality assurance. The Bologna Process has been used to define and disseminate an influential vision of European higher education and has encouraged numerous developments in the area of quality assurance within higher education institutions. In Europe, common standards have been developed for quality assurance processes and a European network of quality assurance agencies has been established (Jakobi & Rusconi, 2009; Keeling, 2006).

More than 2.5 million students are studying outside of their home countries, and the number is expected to rise to 7 million by 2020 (Altbach et al., 2009). This mobility of students is one of the most visible aspects of globalization. The United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have adjusted visa and immigration requirements to attract foreign students (typically from Asia) and have done so, according to Altbach et al. (2009), in order to maintain economic competitiveness and realize financial gains by recruiting a greater number of full fee-paying international students. Another major mobility trend consists of students within the European Union studying internationally in other European institutions, a transfer that is facilitated by the Bologna Process.

Implementing institutional, regional, or national quality assurance processes are challenging, but ensuring quality for international higher education programs and cross-border courses is more complex. This is especially true in countries without regulatory systems in place to register out-of-country higher education providers, leaving foreign education providers with no quality assurance frameworks to which they must adhere

(Knight, 2008). Further complications arise due to commercial, self-appointed and self-serving accreditors that sell fictitious accreditation labels when no national accreditation system is in place or required for foreign education providers. When considering quality assurance in the context of internationalization of higher education, Altbach and Knight (2007) raise several issues that need to be considered, especially in countries or provinces/states that wish to compete internationally. It is important to question whether cross-border courses and programs are recognized by the countries involved; how regulators ensure quality of courses and programs that are not part of a nationally based quality assurance process; what the accreditation process actually encompasses; what mechanisms exist to recognize qualifications gained through international study; and what international practices and policies exist to help ensure quality.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005), which includes Canada amongst its 30 democratic member states, developed a set of *Guidelines for Quality Provision in Cross-Border Higher Education* aiming to encourage international cooperation, to highlight the importance of quality provision in cross-border higher education, and to protect students from low-quality higher education programs and accreditation and degree mills (Knight, 2008). But these are just guidelines; Canada does not have a national system for measuring or assuring the quality of domestic programs in higher education institutions, much less international or cross-border programs. In Canada, the provinces and territories are given authority to establish their own laws, policies, and procedures to govern university operations. Thus, a national quality assurance, program audit, or accreditation system does not exist.

Quality assurance, program audits, and accreditation largely have been left up to

individualized institutional policies and processes within Canada, which often are administered by provincial or regional agencies. Eight Canadian provinces have established an organization representing the universities, an agency of the provincial government, or a joint committee of government and institutions to oversee quality assurance, program audits, and/or accreditations of new programs. British Columbia and Alberta each have an entity that monitors quality assurance (the Degree Quality Assessment Board and the Campus Alberta Quality Council, respectively). The Council on Post-Secondary Education operates in Manitoba while the Manitoba-Saskatchewan Universities Program Review Audit Council oversees program audits in the latter provinces.

In Ontario, the COU and the OUCQA are taking on the role of preparing province-wide quality assurance procedures. In Quebec, three bodies regulate the province's higher education programs: the Conference of Rectors and Principals of Quebec Universities; the Commission d'évaluation des projets de programmes; and the Commission de vérification de l'évaluation des programmes. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island all are governed under the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission and the Association of Atlantic Universities Joint Quality Assessment Committee. Newfoundland and Labrador is the only Canadian province without its own quality assurance agency for universities. Over the last 15 years, the postsecondary landscape has become more complex, with certain provinces now allowing non-degree-granting colleges the ability to offer specific degrees, some provinces now allowing colleges to be transformed into universities, and some provinces now allowing external or private universities to offer programs in Canada (Baker & Miosi, 2010). This all adds to the state of flux in which Canada finds itself with respect to quality assurance of university education.

By leaving quality assurance and accreditation under the authority of provincial regulations and processes, it will be difficult for Canadian universities to collectively join in as a nation on the international move towards quality assurance in higher education or to be considered equivalent to other countries that have been working towards mobility and internationalization. As such, alignment with the Bologna Process more likely may occur on a province-by-province basis, and implementing the new QAF in Ontario universities is one step toward becoming Bologna-compatible.

### **Technological Influences**

The push for mobility and internationalization is made possible through advances in information and communication technologies. The Internet allows for widespread electronic delivery of information which has allowed universities and other higher education institutions to provide online courses and distance-education programs to students on both a local and global scale, thus corresponding to both the internationalization as well as the corporatization of education (Hedges, 2009; Noble, 2002). Technology has allowed for growth in the numbers and types of educational providers, especially private and for-profit providers. It has also allowed for inclusion of varying modes of delivery as well as a dramatic increase in student enrolments. It is the promise of convenience and accessibility—anytime and anywhere—that attracts many students who otherwise may not be able to study in the traditional in-class methods.

According to Bob Rae's 2005 report to the Ontario Premier and the Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities titled *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*, distance education is a key to the success of many students in Ontario who do not have access to a traditional campus. Athabasca University, an Alberta-based online university, is the fastest

growing campus in Ontario. Rae, however, clearly indicates that he does not suggest Ontario should adopt a new online learning university, stating that it would be expensive and duplicative of what already exists. Instead, he suggests, the better way is to encourage competition in this area, insist on best practices, and find practical ways to fund innovation and collaboration. Nonetheless, the current Ontario government believes otherwise. As part of its Open Ontario Plan throne speech (March 8, 2010), Ontario announced its goal to open an online university in Ontario. While such a development is possibly motivated by a fear of being left behind and by the incessant pressures of progress, it is important that the pedagogical and economic costs nevertheless be evaluated before such an online institution is implemented. Noble (2002) suggests that the commercialization of higher education plays a substantial role in the rush to implement technology, and it becomes difficult here to draw a clear line between the influence of technology and the influence of economics on quality assurance in education.

Technology allows for the commodification of higher education by providing the means to transform courses into courseware and learning repositories that can be produced and sold as copyrighted videos, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and websites. The true cost of online education, which must take into account the cost of equipment, upgrades, maintenance, licensing, and technical, administrative, marketing, and sales support staff is often not considered in advance, according to Noble (2002). When institutions realize these unexpected costs, they need to compensate by lowering their labour costs by hiring part-time instructors or markers paid on a per-piece rate and by increasing the student-to-teacher ratio. This once again redirects university funding away from its primary teaching function and to other functions that promote and sustain the commodification of higher

education. This, Noble argues, essentially undermines the pedagogical promise of the distance education method, causes a degradation of the quality of education, leads to decreased incentive and motivation on the part of students, and results in higher attrition rates. The introduction of online and technology-driven delivery modes of education leads to demands for quality assurance to ensure that degrees obtained electronically are considered equivalent to degrees that are obtained through traditional methods.

### **Social Influences**

While it might seem that technology has the ability to increase accessibility to higher education, in many ways it has created limitations, specifically regarding who has access. The high costs associated with delivering online education have prevented many developing nations from providing or accessing higher education institutions (Altbach et al., 2009). Thus, the world's most economically challenged countries are increasingly being left behind.

The political and economic calls to increase enrolment in higher education are other initiatives that were supposed to increase accessibility. But once again, the drive to increase enrolment and participation rates has not benefited all groups in society equally. According to Altbach and Knight (2007), privileged classes have retained their relative advantage in nearly all nations despite efforts to increase participation and inclusivity, and certain population groups remain disadvantaged. For example, participation tends to be below the national average for populations living in remote or rural areas and for indigenous groups of people. Social inequalities, especially those that are deeply rooted in history and culture, can influence a student's ability to succeed. It is important that these inequalities be considered when attempting to increase participation, inclusivity,

and success. Cross-border and international higher education leads to inequities since it is those students who are the wealthiest or otherwise privileged who are able to afford the higher costs of international or foreign tuition fees. Altbach and Knight warn that if the current trends of internationalization continue, the distribution of the world's wealth, knowledge, and talent will become even more unbalanced.

Even though accessibility might not be equal among all groups in society, the OECD (2008) estimates that by 2030 the student population will be quite different from what it is today. The OECD expects that women will form the majority of student populations and that there will be a greater variety of students with respect to ethnicity, background, ability, age, and socioeconomic status, as well as a greater number of part-time students. We can also expect to see greater diversity with respect to expertise, training, ability, and interest of faculty, academic staff, and administration. Further, programs and courses are adding to the diversity of educational options for students. All of this diversity and difference has raised questions about consistency and efficacy that have helped support the demand for quality assurance processes.

But can diversity and quality assurance work together when they are seemingly at odds with each other? Quality assurance can only work when there are agreed-upon standards and comparisons, but diversity bases itself on differences and uniqueness. Further, quality assurance is usually about assessing, applying criteria, and making judgements, while diversity is concerned with acceptance without corrective actions. It is possible though, as Lechleiter (2009) observed, that quality assurance and institutional diversity efforts may become mutually supportive when quality-assurance programmers become aware that diversity is a condition for change and should be based on mutuality,

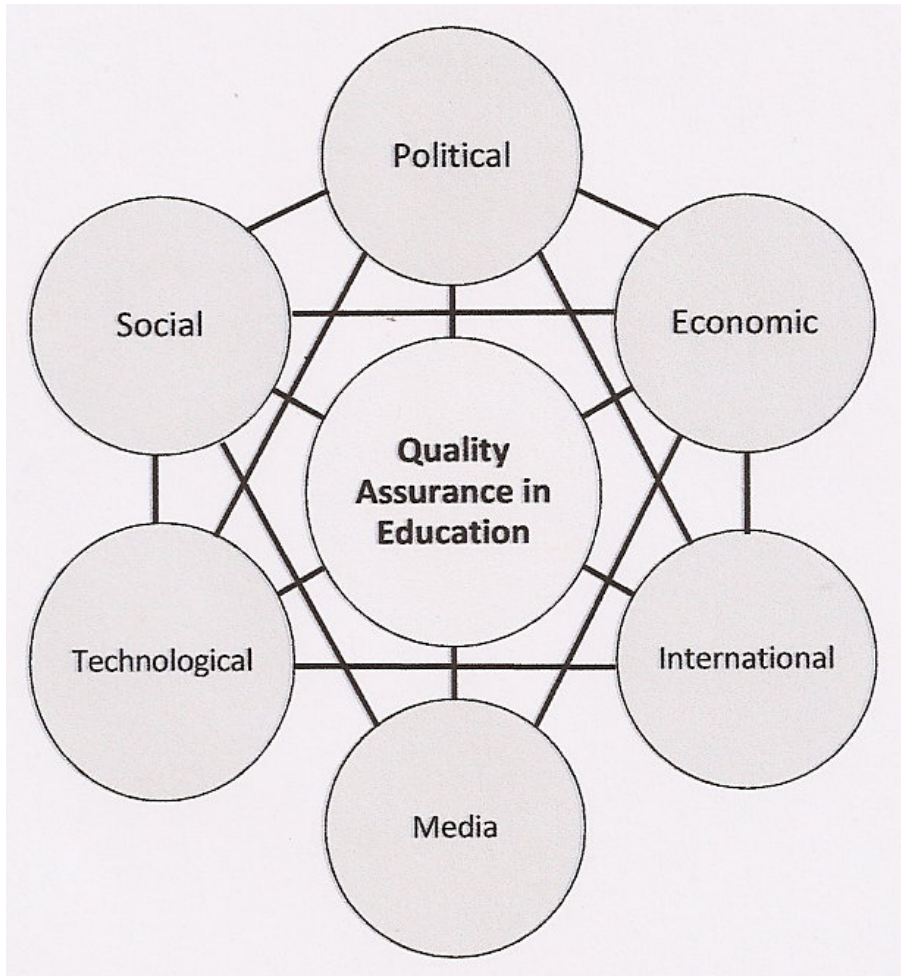


trust, reciprocity, and respect of learning and diversity. Perhaps Ontario universities' ability to develop their own institution-specific quality assurance processes will help to address this inconsistency between quality assurance and diversity.

### **Influences of Quality Assurance: A Conceptual Model**

The demand for quality assurance of Ontario university programs has come from many areas. In researching the origin of this demand, I began to grapple with the complexity of the influences that have led to and shaped the new policy for assuring quality in Ontario universities. Although I have presented some of the major political, economic, media, international, technological, and social influences rather discretely in the preceding sections, I believe that these six influences are anything but distinct. They each impact, influence, and interact with each other in complex and unpredictable ways. They are dynamic and they work together and against each other in changing ways to create demand for quality assurance in education. In some years or decades, some of the influences might be stronger and more persuasive at shaping quality assurance than in other years.

The model shown in Figure 3 depicts the major influences that shape demand for quality assurance in Ontario universities. This model can be adapted to show how broader trends may affect how the influences drive and shape quality assurance at a particular time in a particular context. (I have not attempted to quantify which area has had the strongest influence.) If, however, one were to adapt this model and attempt to represent the strength of each influence on quality assurance (e.g., with varying circle sizes), one would see an ever-changing model depending on when the analysis was undertaken, which nation was evaluated, or which sector of education was analyzed.



*Figure 3.* Conceptual model of six major influences shaping quality assurance in education.

For example, the annual curriculum-based assessments in grades 3, 6, and 9 that are conducted by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) in Ontario provide information to parents, the public, school staff, and government about student achievement in accordance with learning outcomes and standards (EQAO, 2004). Thus, in the K-12 system in Ontario, political and social trends would have stronger influences on quality assurance than they might in the community college sector, which has been using Key Performance Indicators more in response to corporate and consumer demand.

### **Conclusion and Future Research**

Quality assurance and standards-based evaluation are not unique to Ontario universities. Global shifts are leading to a greater emphasis on standardization, standards-based evaluation, and quality assurance not only in universities, but also in colleges, high schools, and elementary schools. This constitutes a market-driven neoliberal economic move towards accountability in education. In this chapter, I have described some of the influences that have shaped the recent development of quality assurance requirements in Ontario universities. Political, economic, media, international, technological, and social influences all interact and raise concern for accountability in education. Ontario universities have responded by proposing an institution-specific quality assurance process that remains largely in the control of universities, but with consideration of regional needs and government goals.

The new quality assurance processes in Ontario will undoubtedly change future postsecondary education, but certain questions remain: In what ways will it change, and will such changes be beneficial or detrimental? How will faculty, staff, and students respond to the quality assurance process? And finally, how will the new movement to quality assurance change university education as we know it today?

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### **CHAPTER THREE: A SHIFTING CULTURE FOR ONTARIOS UNIVERSITIES<sup>2</sup>**

While a university is often considered to be an institution that generates new ideas and develops new innovations, change within a university is challenged by the existence of deeply rooted norms, values, and structures (O'Toole, 1995). Resistance to change may stem from a desire to maintain the status quo and stability, to hold on to institutional identity and ego, to avoid future shock or fear of the unknown, or as a result of lack of trust, confidence, or knowledge (Lindquist, 1978; O'Toole, 1995). Contrary to the beliefs that universities do not change, there is evidence of recent changes to the existing landscape of postsecondary education. As an update to the previous chapter, I provide a review of the more recent and emerging trends (since 2010) related to quality assurance in higher education. This is followed by an account of stakeholder responses within Ontario, including some of the actions taken by the government, by students, and by universities. I conclude with a commentary on the impact of the system reforms on quality assurance.

#### **Shifting Landscapes**

Universities worldwide are facing many changes to the existing landscape. Questions are being asked about the purpose of universities in an increasingly globalized world where technology allows growing access to freely available information (Altbach, 2010). Demand for participation in postsecondary education is dramatically rising as well. Canada boasts one of the highest postsecondary education attainment rates in the world, with an impressive 51% of its working age population (25-65 year olds) having

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter was written to provide a literature review and update to some of the emerging trends that are impacting the quality assurance movement within postsecondary education. I am the sole author. At the time of submitting this thesis, this chapter has not yet been submitted for publication.

attained some form of postsecondary education (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012). This OECD educational attainment indicator includes postsecondary diplomas (typically offered through colleges) and postsecondary degrees (typically offered through universities).

According to Trow (2010), educational systems can be classified into three types: elite, mass, and universal. An elite access system provides postsecondary education to less than 15% of the population. If a share of 15% or more completes higher education, the educational system may be described as having mass access to education. When over 50% of a population completes higher education, Trow describes the educational system as having universal access. Canada's postsecondary education system has surpassed Trow's threshold and can be described as having a system that provides universal access. Of course, whether 50% truly describes a universal system is debatable, but the point here is the trend towards increasing enrollment and attainment rates of postsecondary education both within and beyond Canada. Within Canada, the province of Ontario has been leading the way on postsecondary education attainment. Former Ontario Premier Dalton McGuinty announced in 2010 his aims to increase the postsecondary education rate from 62% to 70% (Duncan, 2010). Now, more than 70% of 25-44 year old Ontarians have completed postsecondary education (Wiggers, Kustra, & Fee, 2014).

Ontario universities are educating over 400,000 full-time equivalent undergraduate students through 21 universities, up from 35,000 students in 14 universities in the early 1960s (Clark, Moran, Skolnik, & Trick, 2009). And, as stated in a more recent report from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO, 2013), as long as growth remains the predominant determinant of additional provincial

government funding for postsecondary education institutions, we can expect to see all institutions in Ontario seeking to grow even in the absence of demand or capacity to accommodate more students. Fostering the enrolment growth is not a sustainable practice if we are concerned about the quality of educational programming and the quality of the student learning experience, especially with a high-cost university model in times of diminishing resources.

Ontario's universities have, since the 1960s, embraced the research university model following the belief that high-quality undergraduate education is best delivered by professors who are active researchers. Over time, there has been a slow shift that has seen an increasing emphasis on research over teaching, transforming Ontario's teaching-focused universities of the 1960s to the research-focused institutions they are today (Clark et al., 2009).

Clark et al. (2009) raised sustainability concerns with this model under the current trends of increasing enrollments. With a higher emphasis on research, undergraduate teaching loads for full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty have decreased to allow for more focus on producing research results and applying for research funding. At the same time, because average class sizes have increased, universities have been compensating by hiring temporary and part-time faculty, calling into question the quality of education that is offered. This financially driven coping strategy, Clark and colleagues argued, is in direct conflict with Ontario's initial goals to provide undergraduate education by teacher-researchers.

When such a conflict or wide gap exists between what institutions think they ought to be doing and what they are doing, an opportunity exists to spark change

(Lindquist, 1978). These gaps might be identified by those internal to the university who then may decide to champion change initiatives within the university. The gaps or conflicts might, on the other hand, be identified by students, by corporations who hire graduates, by government, or by other external stakeholders. These pressures are real in the current context, and one result is the loud calls and demands for quality. Pressures exist in Ontario to change, to implement new programs, policies, or processes aimed at quality assurance, quality enhancement, and accountability.

### **Responses to the Shifting Landscape**

Some of these demands for quality within Ontario are shaping and being shaped by the shifting landscape. I focus on exploring responses and actions of three particular groups of stakeholders: the Government of Ontario, Ontario's students, and responses from Ontario's universities.

#### **Government Response**

The calls and demands for universities and colleges to change and the demands for a high-quality postsecondary education experience are not going unnoticed. Perhaps one of the more influential actors involved in shifting the Ontario landscape is the HEQCO. This arms-length agency of the Government of Ontario was created in 2005 in response to Bob Rae's report on higher education in Ontario (Rae, 2005). The HEQCO is mandated to conduct research, evaluate the postsecondary system, and provide policy recommendations to the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities (MTCU) to enhance the quality, access, and accountability of Ontario's colleges and universities. HEQCO (2013) has recognized the current challenge that exists with providing a high quality education in a climate of continued growth and diminishing resources. They

warned that if quality is to be preserved or enhanced, significant system-wide changes would be required; changes that would necessitate a more active government role in system planning that goes beyond providing financial incentive for increased enrolment growth. In a recent report, HEQCO advocated strongly for a top-down, government-lead, system re-design that utilizes funding as a major lever to motivate and steer change (HEQCO, 2013). It suggested providing strategic and competitive funding opportunities to universities and colleges to steer the system, influence the behaviour of institutions, and achieve specific desired outcomes that are aligned with government objectives.

Recent provincially led initiatives suggest that these recommendations were indeed accepted and taken up by the MTCU. In 2012, the MTCU launched some initiatives that were aimed to drive institutional change. It invited universities and colleges to engage in discussions around strengthening Ontario's postsecondary education system (MTCU, 2012) and called upon each institution to develop a Strategic Mandate Agreement that outlined its unique and differentiating priorities, missions, values, and priorities. Neither of these initiatives led to substantial system-wide change (HEQCO, 2013). The following year revealed a much more involved government directive. The Strategic Mandate Agreements were re-negotiated between the government and universities and signed agreements were reached in August 2014 (MTCU, 2014). Also, former MTCU Minister Brad Duguid announced the government's commitment to supporting innovation and building a high-quality, sustainable postsecondary education system (MTCU, 2013). A call for proposals to access \$45 million in Productivity and Innovation Funding was launched. Colleges and universities were able to compete for these funds to engage in program prioritization, course re-design, or administrative and

service delivery transformation projects. One of the emphasized goals was to improve the quality of learning and learning outcomes (MTCU, 2013).

To have access to such a significant source of funding, albeit one-time funding available on very tight timelines, for implementing new innovations for teaching and learning was a definite change to the norm that many university and college members had become accustomed. For years it had been increasingly difficult to obtain funds for research or development projects that aimed to improve the quality of education and enhance student learning. Funding directed to enhance teaching and learning is a step in the right direction; thoughtfully designed projects with long-term funding and sustainability plans may indeed result in quality enhancement. The government, however, should also be aware that high levels of short-term funding on tight timelines may not have the revolutionary impact on postsecondary learning they hope to inspire.

### **Students' Response**

Postsecondary education is for and about students, so it is essential to gain an appreciation of how students are responding to the changing landscapes in Ontario. One group to turn to is the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA), an active alliance representing undergraduate students at eight student associations across Ontario. OUSA conducts research, develops policies, and lobbies the government to affect change and improve accessibility, affordability, accountability, and quality of undergraduate education in Ontario. In 2014, OUSA has been focusing some of its efforts on a campaign called HIRE Education, a campaign intended to develop a dialogue around the greater objective of postsecondary education, and what universities are “hired” by students to accomplish.

Graham, Franchetto, and Madden (2013) recently wrote a policy paper that sought to address elements and concerns that students see as impacting student success in Ontario's universities. Believing that student success is inextricably linked with a quality learning experience, OUSA emphasizes the importance of establishing "strong and meaningful learning outcomes, including core transferable technical and 'soft' competences" (Graham et al., 2013, p. 2) and using these to guide, assess, and review the education that is provided to students. Linking student success with the achievement of learning outcomes, Graham et al. (2013) stress the importance of clearly articulated, defined, and measured learning outcomes and further propose coordinated systems of measuring learning outcomes. Condon (2013) further encourages universities to adopt quality assurance processes that can help in strengthening the quality of courses offered through the Ontario Online Initiative.

Whether online, blended, or face-to-face, OUSA believes that high quality, intentionally designed courses and programs that have measured learning outcomes can foster student success. OUSA's HIRE Education campaign claims that traditional knowledge dissemination from instructor to student must be replaced with teaching that teaches students what to do with the plethora of information at their disposal. With advances in technology and the ubiquitous availability of knowledge and information, students, like government officials, demand changes that may reshape the very purpose of a university.

### **Universities' Response**

Ontario universities themselves, while often thought of as being slow to respond to shifting landscapes, were proactive in recognizing a need to update the quality assurance processes within their institutions (OUCQA, 2010). While a rigorous program



approval and review process already existed through the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies and the Undergraduate Program Review and Audit Committee, the COU recognized the changes that were occurring and began responding to some of the pressures in 2005 (OUCQA, 2010). Collaborative efforts led to the articulation and adoption of province-wide degree level expectations for bachelors, honours, masters, and doctoral degrees. These minimal threshold standards were designed to relate to international trends and enable international transferability of degrees. This represented a major shift towards the promotion of a student-centred outcomes-focused system-wide curriculum renewal.

More recently, the COU endorsed and began implementing a new Quality Assurance Framework [QAF] (OUCQA, 2010). Under the auspices of the QAF, each publicly assisted university in Ontario developed and implemented its own Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) that is consistent with its institutional mission statements and with the province-wide degree level expectations (or the institution's version of these statements). Each university's IQAP was subject to the approval of a newly instituted Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance. Within the IQAPs, universities have outlined detailed protocols that they will follow for:

1. new graduate and undergraduate program approvals,
2. expedited approvals for major substantive changes that are made to existing and previously approved programs,
3. cyclical reviews of existing programs, and
4. auditing the institution's compliance with its own IQAP.

These changes introduced a need for programs to clearly articulate program learning outcomes (QAF section 2.1.1) that align with the undergraduate or graduate degree level expectations. There must also be appropriate modes of delivery and teaching and learning activities (QAF section 2.1.5), as well as appropriate assessment methods (QAF section 2.1.6), that align with and demonstrate achievement of the intended learning outcomes (OUCQA, 2010). Consideration of the curriculum as a whole and the program-wide achievement of learning outcomes have involved a rather significant shift in thinking about education, especially at the undergraduate level.

Traditional approaches to undergraduate programming in higher education were often characterized by well-intentioned subcommittees within departments who make ad hoc decisions about adding or modifying individual course offerings, paying little attention to integration of the courses as a whole program (Hubball & Gold, 2007). Roy, Borin, and Kustra (2007) explained that typical curriculum changes in university programs had occurred at the course level, often because a course was assigned to a new instructor and the new instructor's ideas inspired a new version of the course. They argued though that this approach to curriculum change is less likely to foster overall improvement than change that grows out of a department-wide initiative and aims to reform or refine an entire program from first year to fourth year. Basing their work on Lindquist's (1978) *Strategies for Change*, Roy et al. suggested that change is enhanced and sustained when a long-term vision is developed, when departmental input and consensus is obtained, and when the change focuses on how students learn rather than what they learn. They also promoted the use of scholarship and research on teaching and

learning to provide a rationale for change and suggested that such scholarly approaches increase the likelihood of success.

A model and guide for facilitating curriculum development in higher education was constructed and put into practice (Wolf, 2007; Wolf, Hill, & Evers, 2006) at the University of Guelph and is viewed as an exemplar in Canadian teaching and learning support centres. They promote a faculty-driven, data-informed, and educational developer-supported approach to developing curriculum that guides a department through a curriculum visioning exercise. Beginning with a curriculum assessment based on Kirkpatrick's (1998) four levels of evaluation as a framework, faculty members work alongside other stakeholders to identify attributes of the ideal graduate. These attributes are then used to help form the foundation of program outcomes and to engage in an analysis of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT analysis) or success stories, opportunities, aspirations, and available resources (SOAR analysis). In an ensuing curriculum development phase, staff at the teaching and learning support centre work with the department to collect and analyze data from all of the course instructors. In this phase, instructors are asked to indicate the amount of effort they spend on developing students in each of the stated program outcomes. They also indicate the level of sophistication that they expect and the methods for teaching, learning, and assessments that they use. These data are used to determine which program outcomes are fostered effectively throughout the entire program and which could use refinement or additional development. Finally, the department enters an alignment, coordination, and development phase where follow-up activities are implemented and necessary workshops are provided to faculty to help them meet their goals (Wolf, 2007).

O'Neill's (2010) U.K.-based study explored the practices of educational developers who assist departments in initiating curriculum revision. O'Neill found consistency in how the curriculum revision process was supported in that most educational developers advocated for a process that has constructively aligned learning outcomes, teaching and learning activities, and assessments. There were variations, however, in how the curriculum revision process was initiated. Some educational developers used discussions aimed to identify program aims, others began by facilitating a brainstorming session on the ideal graduate attributes, and still others began by exploring the educational philosophy of the program. The common thread was that all educational developers took a dialogic approach in working with the department to question and learn about the department's awareness of the drivers of change, staff energy for change, and time-frame for change. The dialogic approach also aimed to identify any discipline-specific or department issues and concerns that might be necessary for an educational developer to understand.

The funds and frameworks implemented by government, the demands from students, and the quality assurance processes implemented by universities can all be supported by educational developers within universities' teaching and learning centres. These centres employ individuals with expertise in pedagogy and university teaching practices. Educational developers within these centres can facilitate and help departments to create working environments that are caring and encouraging, and that favour professional formation and, perhaps, even help in establishing a culture within a department that values the notion of quality enhancement (Grabove et al., 2012; Harvey, 2010; Knight, 2006). To help build an institutional culture that values teaching and

learning and continuous enhancement of teaching and learning, educational developers can be involved in these processes to help encourage a focus on quality enhancement of teaching and learning amidst reforms and pressures to otherwise document and demonstrate accountability.

### **A System in Reform?**

The changes in the higher education sector are not minor and the demands for a higher accountability, assurance, and enhancement of quality education are resonating loudly not only in Ontario, but worldwide. A quality assurance movement, dubbed the quality revolution (Newton, 2010), may indeed be a factor in reforming university education. In this section, I review two uses of quality assurance: Quality assurance as a policy instrument and quality assurance as a cultural shift.

#### **Quality Assurance as a Policy Instrument**

Today, according to El-Khawas (2013), quality assurance occupies a central place in higher education policy. Arguing that quality assurance operates in a political world, she commented that quality assurance has become an instrument of public policy. In most countries, some form of quality assurance agency has been given formal authority by national government to regulate and monitor higher education institutions. With rare exceptions, quality assurance agencies are closely tied to their government sponsors, sometimes as a unit of government. In other settings, like in Ontario, an agency such as the Quality Council may operate independently but is dependent on governmental funding and official recognition. Perhaps the Quality Council is independent now, but can it establish its credibility with government and with the public while maintaining its independence? As new pressures face the Ontario government, or as changes take place

in political leadership or in governing coalitions, will the government wish to change this direction?

Perhaps if the Quality Council is able to maintain good relations and connections with the political world and work toward building trust among all quality assurance stakeholders (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011), it may be sustainable in its current arms-length format. But as El-Khawas (2013) warns, quality assurance is inherently political. In many countries, quality assurance as a policy instrument has been created by government and can thus be changed by government, thereby allowing increased control and power of government over university education.

### **Quality Assurance as a Cultural Shift**

Perhaps it is the development of a quality culture—a culture that sees quality as something that can transform students and is capable of adding value through enhancement, growth, and learning—that will have the most impact on improving the quality of teaching and learning within universities.

A quality culture often exists alongside a quality assurance system, but the two must not be confused with each other. According to Harvey (2007), a quality culture exists when members of the group or institution hold a collective view that quality is improved when teaching praxis and student learning is enhanced. A quality assurance system is the policy or procedures that are in place, which may or may not be embraced and lived as a part of the culture. On the other hand, when a quality culture exists within a department or institution, student voices are heard, new learning initiatives are enabled, innovative teaching practices are encouraged, leadership is inspirational, critical evaluation is welcomed, and a symbiotic relationship is formed between instructors and

their learning communities (Harvey, 2007). The quality culture and the quality assurance system are intertwined though. Harvey suggests that the quality assurance system is only valued within a quality culture if it has a clear purpose and aims not solely to demonstrate accountability, but focuses on facilitating improvement and encouraging reflexivity, praxis, self-reflection, and innovation. The development of a quality culture needs to grow in harmony with the quality assurance system, as Harvey identified from the discussions held at the First European Forum for Quality Assurance. Through these forum discussions, participants suggested that the development of a quality culture could be impeded if the quality assurance system involves high stakes, if departmental structures and practices are too heterogeneous, if there is a lack of consistency in policy and strategy, if implementation procedures change too frequently, or if there is a lack of cohesion within the institution or department.

Successful change that leads to quality enhancement of learning in postsecondary education needs to be fostered through negotiated social construction and consensus-building rather than by decree (Askling & Stensaker, 2002). In order to bring about a cultural shift, multiple stakeholders must be involved. Whether the change involves an emphasized focus on teaching, learning, or assessment, involving student, staff, faculty, and administrative stakeholders would help influence a campus culture that engages with and values systemic, strategic quality enhancement (Blaich & Wise, 2011; Hersh & Keeling, 2013; Hutchings, 2010). A strong quality culture is more likely to emerge when examples of quality are recognized, celebrated, and rewarded among the instructors and where educators are collaboratively engaged in identifying new opportunities for enhancing the student learning experience. Thus, an important step in the development of

a quality culture might be to bring students, excellent and innovative instructors, educational developers, and quality assurance administrators together to promote enhanced teaching and learning within universities.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Developing a quality culture cannot simply be a top-down process or a process imposed by government policy, as Harvey (2007) and Skordoulis (2004) warn, but must involve an iterative process of both top-down direction and bottom-up implementation efforts where faculty members within the departments are involved in developing a long-term vision that focuses on quality enhancement from a student learning perspective. Perhaps by involving students, together with the champions of teaching and learning innovations and quality assurance administrators, we can find ways to build a quality culture alongside the implementation of Ontario's QAF.

There is potential for new quality assurance regimes to not only account for and assure quality, but to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. When externally driven top-down change initiatives are paralleled by an accompanying growth in a culture that embraces the change for the purpose of enhancement, institutional change that fosters enhanced teaching and learning may indeed flourish. But quality assurance policies alone, without shifts in institutional culture, values, and perspectives, may not have the impact they are intended to effect.



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## CHAPTER FOUR: INTERPRETING *QUALITY* FROM ONTARIOS QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK<sup>3</sup>

Documents are important in shaping and understanding a university. Prior (2003) goes so far as to say that “a university (any university) is in its documents rather than its buildings” (p. 60). Indeed, it is the formal documents that are responsible for naming the university, enabling the university to award degrees, and legitimizing the university. Prior (2011) argues that it is the documents that define the organization as a university and sustain the organizational features of the university to allow for its existence.

University policies should be reflective of the institution’s mission, otherwise, distorted priorities and misaligned practices may proliferate, putting the goal of the university and the actions within the university in direct opposition of each other (Biggs, 2001). “Disparity between an institution’s mission statement and its reward system (what it says and what it does) undercuts the effectiveness of each: If these goals are to be reached, the institution must reward behaviours that best support its mission” (Diamond, 1999, p. ix). Institution-wide vision and mission need to be the foundation for the institution’s strategic plan and bottom-up practices and innovations in teaching and learning (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012; Hinton, 2012).

Alignment of beliefs and practices is a concept that has been raised often in the higher education literature (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Diamond, 1998; Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; Kuh, Laird, & Umbach, 2004; Ramsden, 2003; Reeves, 2006), and it would be prudent also in the context of quality assurance (QA). While it is common for university

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<sup>3</sup> I am the lead author of this co-authored chapter with Abeer Siddiqui. This chapter was developed during Abeer’s time as an undergraduate student and research assistant at McMaster University. Permission from Ms. Siddiqui has been granted to include this manuscript as part of this dissertation.

mission statements to say that teaching and learning are top priorities within the institution, there are often, in practice, other priorities that work towards impeding the quality of university education that is offered. “Many institutions in their policies, practices and reward systems actually downgrade teaching. Some of this is externally imposed, ironically by some aspects of QA itself, and by managerialism and the commercialisation of knowledge” (Biggs, 2001, p. 235). As Biggs (2001) notes, any practices that downgrade the importance of teaching through their policies and practices are misaligned with and may act in opposition to the fundamental purpose of an institution that aims to provide quality teaching and learning.

In this paper, we explore the alignment of beliefs and conceptions of quality to ways in which Ontario universities measure quality in their academic programs. Three types of documents were analyzed as part of this study: The overarching Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) that was implemented across all Ontario universities in 2011(Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance [OUQCA], 2010), the Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) documents that were developed by 10 selected universities in Ontario in response to the QAF, and the institutional mission statements of each of the selected universities.

### **Background and Literature Review**

To determine whether institutional statements or beliefs about quality are aligned with some of the quality assurance practices that are implemented to assure quality, some background literature will be helpful in the area of defining and measuring quality.

### **Conceptions of Quality**

To begin, it is important to gain familiarity with some of the common meanings of

quality. In their seminal piece, *Defining Quality*, Harvey and Green (1993) explore the various ways quality may be conceptualized by various stakeholders, including students, academics, administrators, employers, governments, and professional organizations. They have identified five conceptions of quality in higher education:

1. **Quality as Exceptional.** Quality is seen as something that is distinctive and excellent. It is not easily definable, but assumed to be easily recognizable and often measured in terms of reputation. Quality is achieved when high standards are surpassed.
2. **Quality as Perfection or Consistency.** Here, quality focuses on the processes and conformity to specifications, often striving for zero defects in the process. Quality is assessed by adherence and conformity to standards in process, rather than measures of inputs or outputs; it is achieved when consistent and flawless outcomes are produced.
3. **Quality as Fitness for Purpose.** Quality relates directly to the intended purpose. In the context of higher education, it relates to the purpose as seen by students or the purpose as articulated by institutional mission or goals. Quality is achieved when the product or service meets stated purposes.
4. **Quality as Value for Money.** Quality is assessed by the given return on an investment. It is typically approached from an accountability perspective and relates to government funding and cost-effectiveness.
5. **Quality as Transformation.** Quality here is conceptualized as a process of change—education is not a product, but a process that incurs change in (i.e., “transforms”) the student. Quality is approached with the expectation that there is



an ongoing process of student transformation and enhancement. Attention is paid to the value added to students with respect to their own empowerment, autonomy, and critical thinking ability. Quality is thus achieved and assessed by the educational gains of students.

These definitions of quality are helpful in beginning to appreciate the variety of ways in which quality can be perceived and conceptualized in higher education. Considering the conceptions of quality in isolation, however, will do little to aid in the understanding of how QA processes exist within a broader cultural perspective (Harvey & Stensaker, 2008). We must also consider the actions and behaviours in relation to the conceptions or goals. Actions and behaviours in this document analysis are limited in scope to focus particularly on the evaluation criteria and metrics that are required as per the QAF and IQAP documents.

### **Measuring Quality**

In considering the notion of measuring quality, attention may be turned to identifying indicators of educational quality. In his *Dimensions of Quality*, Gibbs (2010) examined a variety of frameworks for quality and how they could be used as valid indicators in education. These indicators include presage variables, process variables, and product variables. Presage variables assess the university context before students begin learning and include resources, research performances, quality of students upon admission, and the quality of the academic staff. Process variables are metrics that relate contextual information while student learning is in progress and include class size, level of student engagement, and the quality/quantity of instructor feedback. Finally, product variables examine the outcomes of the educational process and include such variables as

student performance, retention, and employability. While named slightly differently, Gibbs's (2010) presage, process, and product variables are representative of other authors' work on quality input, process, output, and outcome variables (Borden & Bottrill 1994; Cave, Hanney, & Kogan 1991; Chalmers 2008; Richardson 1994), where presage and input variables are congruent and product variables are comprised of output and outcome variables.

### **Aligning Conceptions and Metrics**

It is important to acknowledge that an institution may (and should) assign value to all three of Gibbs's (2010) variables and metrics. Emphasis on specific indicators of quality portrays particular conceptions of quality; conversely, inherent conceptions of quality influence which indicators are used to assess institutional quality. Oftentimes though the relationship between conceptions and indicators is not clear or distorted. It is therefore important to map the relationship between institutional emphasis on specific metrics (presage, process, or product) and the corresponding conceptions of quality described by Harvey and Green (1993). Clear articulation of this relationship will not only allow institutions to understand their approach to quality, but more significantly, give them the initial framework and means by which to shift their approach should they so desire.

Presage metrics that focus on demonstrating high quality resources and the high quality of their incoming students are largely indicative of an exceptional conception of quality—one that seeks to demonstrate distinction and excellence. Little evidence of documenting effective teaching practices exists; rather emphasis is placed on the research capacity and quality of faculty members. Conversely, process variables—which include

class size, class contact hours, independent study hours and total learning hours, the effects of the research environment, the level of intellectual challenge and student engagement, formative assessment and feedback, and quality enhancement processes—provide information on not only teaching and learning, but more importantly, on *how* such teaching and learning occurs. Therefore, these metrics are reflective of a transformative conception of quality. This notion of quality is based on the principle of qualitative change; in the context of higher education, quality is achieved through the ongoing process of transformation that enhances and empowers the student (Harvey & Green, 1993). Such an approach is rooted in value-added notions of quality: “value added is a ‘measure’ of quality in terms of the extent to which the educational experience enhances the knowledge, abilities and skills of students” (Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 25). Finally, a focus on product variables, such as graduation rates, employability, and achievement of learning outcomes, is indicative of conceptions of quality that are grounded in fitness for purpose, perfection, or value for money. In such conceptions, the extent to which quality is achieved is dependent on the final “product” of higher education, whether it be with respect to fulfilling an institution’s or student’s purpose(s), or with respect to the final return on investment by stakeholders.

### **Summary**

The alignment of beliefs and practices in the context of university quality assurance would need to consider a variety of definitions and conceptions of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993) and a variety of quality metrics and indicators (Gibbs, 2010). In this study, we attempted to discern alignment between the metrics and conceptions of quality within Ontario’s recently implemented QAF and resultant IQAP documents

(OUCQA, 2010). We considered the results of this study in relation to Biggs's (2001) approaches to quality assurance that advocate for the alignment between institutional conceptions and beliefs about quality, quality enhancement practices, and quality feasibility. Finally, we propose recommendations to ensure stronger alignment within the quality assurance documents.

### **Methods**

This study was designed as a qualitative and interpretive analysis of how publicly available quality assurance documents interpret the meaning of quality in the context of university education (Yanow, 2000). Beginning with the QAF, we focused on researching how a selection of institutionally produced IQAP documents attended to the possible meanings and conceptions of quality in situational and contextual response to the implementation of the QAF. We considered these in relation to the metrics and indicators that the document recommended or required.

#### **Selection of Documents**

The QAF document was obtained from the OUCQA website. A selection of 10 Ontario universities was identified to reflect institutional diversity in location, student population, and Maclean's classification within the province. The IQAP documents and mission statements were collected from each selected university's website. All documents were publicly available on websites and were located and collected during the fall of 2013.

#### **Document Analysis**

Document analysis, according to Bowen (2009), is a "systematic procedure of reviewing or evaluating documents" (p. 27) that involves selecting, reviewing, interpreting, and synthesizing data contained within documents. Drawing on textual

analysis approaches (Scott, 2006), our analysis considered specific parts of the document in relation to both the whole document and the overarching QAF; in doing so, we aimed to “assess our initial interpretations of the text for consistency with elements of the context of the situation. That is, if we consider a particular piece of text as part of the whole situation, context allows us to connect this piece to the whole” (Lejano, 2006, p. 103).

We focused on the parts of the document that provided insight into the variety of ways in which quality can be interpreted and articulated within the documents. Harvey and Green (1993) and Gibbs (2010) provided the theoretical foundations for our inquiry into how institutions *conceive* quality and how they use metrics to *assure* quality. In order to evaluate beliefs and conceptions of quality, we chose to interpret institutional mission statements and IQAP preambles. Mission statements not only convey particular messages regarding institutional goals and values, but also provide ideological basis for an institution’s organisational life (Morphew & Hartley, 2006); thus, in the absence of explicitly articulated quality definitions, mission statements may serve as reflections of institutional conceptions of quality for the purposes of our study. IQAP preambles provided us with additional insight on both the purposes of quality assurance in specific institutions and the context in which QA practices are conducted.

Our interpretation of how institutions assess quality was based on the evaluation criteria and self-study requirements detailed under the protocol for cyclical program review. Cyclical program review procedures, rather than procedures for new program, were evaluated as they are reflective of ongoing quality assurance practices and are, consequently, more frequently used by institutions.

## Results

We first report on the conceptions of quality that were interpreted from the quality assurance documents, focusing our analysis on the overarching and guiding QAF and the institutional adaptations to the framework. Second, we report the concepts of quality elucidated from the suggested or required metrics and indicators both from the QAF and the resultant IQAPs.

### Conceptions of Quality in the QAF

Though the QAF does not explicitly define quality or articulate its beliefs, theories, or conceptions of quality, it does state the purpose of quality assurance for Ontario universities and provides a rationale for the implementation of the QAF. By reviewing the introduction to the QAF, we were able to gain some understanding of conceptions of quality that authors of the framework may have held. We will first summarize the rationale the QAF provides and the purposes for which it was implemented in Ontario, and then discuss how they align it with Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptions of quality.

The QAF was developed to address demands for public accountability, pressures for greater international acceptance of Ontario degrees, and needs to balance accountability with normal curricular evolution. Primarily, the QAF recognizes the importance of quality assurance in higher education. In response to rising demands for public accountability, the QAF has been designed to be “more streamlined, more effective, more transparent, and more publicly accountable [... through a process of...] articulating Degree Level Expectations and learning outcomes in postsecondary education” (OUCQA, 2010, p. 1). The QAF also aims to “facilitate greater international

acceptance of [Ontario] degrees and improve [Ontario university] graduates' access to university programs and employment worldwide" (p. 1). In this sense, the QAF is framed within and reflective of the international context and trends in quality assurance. Finally, the QAF describes the importance of balancing "the need for accountability with the need to encourage normal curricular evolution [... and ... ] supports innovation and improvement while cultivating a culture of transparency and accountability—i.e. quality assurance that produces quality enhancement" (p. 1).

Harvey and Green (1993) have argued that accountability is associated with the value-for-money approach to quality, as accountability measures provide institutions the opportunity to publically justify monetary investment of both taxpayers and their students. However, quality as value for money is primarily about increasing cost-effectiveness (i.e., providing the service at the lowest cost possible and thereby increasing the return on investment); the QAF, conversely, aims to garner greater public accountability through a commitment to aligning academic programs to province-wide degree level expectations, not to increase cost efficiency. This is more suggestive of quality as fitness for purpose—quality is achieved when the stated purpose (i.e., degree level expectations) is met. The QAF does not insinuate that the goal of QAF is to demonstrate quality as exceptional—there are no references to promoting Ontario's academic programs as distinct and elite, but rather to meet the minimum expectations that are necessary to confer greater acceptance for international recognition of Ontario's academic programs and the graduates of those programs. Furthermore, the QAF does not take the quality as transformation approach—the framework is less concerned with the educational gain or transformation of students, but rather, focused on the *achievement* of

learning outcomes and DLEs—emphasis is not placed on the *process* of student learning, but rather, on the education *product*. As stated previously, QA in Ontario aims to both demonstrate public accountability and increased international transferability of Ontario degrees; achievement of DLEs (i.e., minimum standards) fulfills these purposes. This emphasis on DLEs suggests that the QAF’s approach to quality is primarily embedded in Harvey and Green’s notion of quality as fitness for purpose.

Finally, the QAF aims to address these concerns regarding accountability and international transferability while concurrently respecting institutional responsibility and autonomy. Implementation of the QAF, through IQAPs, should acknowledge institution-specific context and needs and be reflective of, and subsequently address, an institution’s own conception of quality.

### **Institutional Conceptions of Quality**

We analyzed institutional mission statements and associated visions and values and IQAP preambles to understand how an institution approaches and articulates quality. Our interpretations of these are based on Harvey and Green’s (1993) five conceptions of quality. Here, we describe in detail our analysis of one institution (Ryerson University) and present our accumulated findings for all 10 institutions in Table 1.

Ryerson University’s Mission Statement states:

The special mission of Ryerson University is the advancement of applied knowledge and research to address societal need, and the provision of programs of study that provide a balance between theory and application and that prepare students for careers in professional and quasi-professional fields.

As a leading centre for applied education, Ryerson is recognized for the



excellence of its teaching, the relevance of its curriculum, the success of its students in achieving their academic and career objectives, the quality of its scholarship, research and creative activity and its commitment to accessibility, lifelong learning, and involvement in the broader community.

(Ryerson University, 2014, paras. 1-2)

In their discussion of quality as fitness for purpose, Harvey and Green (1993) differentiate between an institution's own purpose and that of its customers'. With respect to an institution's purpose, they note that "quality can be defined in terms of the institution fulfilling its own stated objectives, or mission" (p. 19); with respect to that of the customers, quality is identified "in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets the specifications of the customer" (p. 17). Therefore, in this conception, quality can be achieved when and if the institution meets its own purpose and/or that of its customer (interpreted in this context as students of the institution). Ryerson University (2014) aims to advance "applied knowledge and research to address societal need" (para. 1) while also delivering "programs of study that provide a balance between theory and application and that prepare students for careers in professional and quasi-professional fields" (para. 1). The institution is not striving to be the best at advancing applied knowledge, which would align the university with quality as *exceptional*, but rather simply fulfilling this goal. As Harvey and Green note, "a high quality institution is one which clearly states its mission (or purpose) and is efficient and effective in meeting the goals which it has set itself" (p. 19); therefore, it appears that Ryerson approaches quality as fitness for purpose (institution)—it achieves quality when it meets its own stated purposes.

Table 1

*Analysis of Mission Statements and IQAP Preambles*

Institution	Mission statement	IQAP preamble
Brock University	Exceptional	Exceptional Value for money
Carleton University	Transformation Exceptional	Fitness for purpose
University of Guelph	Transformation Fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose
Laurentian University	Fitness for purpose Transformation	Fitness for purpose
McMaster University	Transformation	Transformation
Queen's University	Exceptional	Exceptional
Ryerson University	Fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose Exceptional
University of Toronto	Fitness for purpose Exceptional	Exceptional
Western University	Exceptional Transformation	Exceptional
Wilfrid Laurier University	Transformation	Fitness for purpose

*Note.* While texts may have been suggestive of multiple concepts of quality, only the most prominent conceptions were included in this summary table.

Ryerson also prides itself for “the relevance of its curriculum [and] the success of its students in achieving their academic and career objectives” (Ryerson University, 2014, para. 2). This emphasis on students’ own objectives suggests that Ryerson also approaches quality from a fitness for purpose (student) perspective: quality is achieved when the institution delivers on “the specifications of the customer” (i.e., the student).

Ryerson’s mission statement also makes note of the “excellence of its teaching” (Ryerson University, 2014, para. 2). Though it can be argued that the use of the word “excellence” holds connotations for quality as exceptional, this emphasis on the teaching process (rather than the presage variables, teachers) aligns the institutional approach to quality with that of quality as transformation. As Harvey and Green (1993) note, quality as exceptional places little to no value on the process of teaching; conversely, quality as transformation aims to enhance and empower the student and teaching becomes an avenue by which this is possible. In summary, Ryerson’s approach to quality evidenced in their mission statement aligns primarily with quality as fitness for purpose, with secondary emphasis on quality as exceptional and transformation.

The IQAP preamble that Ryerson provides largely describes its “compliance with the Quality Assessment Framework” (Ryerson University, 2011 p. 1) established by OUQCA and provides little insight on the institution’s interpretation of quality. The brief introduction preceding the institution’s protocol of cyclical program review, however, lists the purposes the IQAP serve and sheds some light on the matter: “primarily to help ensure that programs achieve and maintain the highest possible standards of academic quality and continue to satisfy societal need [...and] public accountability expectations”

(Ryerson University, 2011, p. 22). The emphasis on these highest possible standards is suggestive of quality as exceptional, similar to the QAF, but the added desire to satisfy societal and accountability expectations suggests that Ryerson believes quality is achieved when these needs are met, thereby also aligning the institution with quality as fitness for purpose.

Analysis of institutional mission statements and IQAP preambles provided a basis for how institutions conceptualized quality in the absence of clearly defined articulations of quality.

### **Using Metrics and Indicators to Assure Quality**

Our analysis of the QAF and IQAP documents suggested indicators and evaluation criteria are presented in Table 2. Our interpretations were based on Gibbs's (2010) categorization of quality indicators or variables and how they align with Harvey and Green's five conceptions of quality. It is important to note that our 10 institutions duplicate suggested indicators and evaluation criteria provided in the QAF with a few additions and/or modifications; our analysis of how institutions assess quality, therefore, is primarily based on these additions and modifications.

We first evaluate how quality is conceptualised in the QAF's suggested quality indicators. With regards to quality of faculty, the QAF lists the following indicators: qualifications, research, and scholarly record; class sizes; percentages of classes taught by permanent or nonpermanent (contractual) faculty; and numbers, assignments, and qualifications of part-time or temporary faculty. With the exception of the class sizes, these indicators are primarily presage variables that emphasise "quality of teachers" rather than "quality of teaching" (Gibbs, 2010, p .27).

Table 2

*Analysis of the Additional Quality Indicators Used Within IQAPs*

Institution	Analysis of additional indicators within IQAP	Suggested quality conception
Brock University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NSSE (<b>Process</b>)*</li> <li>- CGPSS (<b>Process</b>)**</li> <li>- Course-level details including learning outcomes and evaluation instruments (<b>Process</b>)</li> <li>- Degree of interactivity (<b>Process</b>)</li> <li>- Teaching assignments, including full vs part-time faculty (<b>Process</b>)</li> <li>- Departmental operating budget (<b>Presage</b>)</li> <li>- Comparators to other programs - with the purpose of demonstrating comparability to other programs rather than excellence. (<b>Unknown</b>; depends on what metrics are used for comparison)</li> <li>- Collaborative arrangements such as co-ops, practica, internships, international exchanges, study abroad, community outreach and involvement, and partnerships. (<b>Process</b>)</li> <li>- Results of current student and alumni surveys (<b>Process; Product</b>)</li> </ul>	<p>Moderate modifications</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Transformation</b></p> <p>(as per modifications)</p>
Carleton University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Student satisfaction (<b>Process or Product depending on metric used</b>)</li> <li>- Sufficient provision for the development of research and analytic/interpretative skills (<b>Unknown</b>; dependent on metrics used)</li> <li>- Career preparation (<b>Process or Product</b>; dependent on metrics used)</li> </ul>	<p>Minimal modifications</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Exceptional</b></p> <p>(as per QAF)</p>
University of Guelph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The unit's definition and application of indicators to determine the learning outcomes of the program (<b>Process or Product</b>; dependent on metrics used).</li> <li>- Activities (<b>Process</b>) and accomplishments (<b>Product</b>) that reaffirm the Unit's objectives, and describe how they relate to the mission of</li> </ul>	<p>Moderate modifications</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Fitness for Purpose</b></p> <p>(as per modifications)</p>

	<p>the University</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Outcome assessment indicators (<b>Product</b>) ***</li> <li>- Coordination between undergraduate and graduate program offerings and academic services within and beyond the institution (<b>Presage; Process</b>)</li> <li>- Comparisons to other programs (<b>Unknown</b>; depends on what metrics are used for comparison)</li> <li>- Note: Combined program and departmental reviews.</li> </ul>	
Laurentian University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Definition of indicators that provide evidence of quality student clientele (e.g. applications, registrations and identified workforce needs) (<b>Presage</b>)</li> <li>- Structural relationship between undergraduate and graduate programs (<b>Presage</b>)</li> </ul>	Minimal modifications <b>Exceptional</b> (as per QAF)
McMaster University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Survey results of in-program students (<b>Process</b>) and alumni (<b>Products</b>) within past five years</li> <li>- NOTE: Indicators of Quality are not listed in IQAP. Data are provided centrally, but it is unclear indicators are used.</li> </ul>	Minimal modifications <b>Exceptional</b> (as per QAF)
Queen's University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Equity, diversity, and accessibility (<b>Presage, Process</b>)</li> <li>- Academic integrity (<b>Process</b>)</li> </ul>	Minimal modifications <b>Exceptional</b> (as per QAF)
Ryerson University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Summary and evaluation of experiential learning opportunities (<b>Process</b>).</li> <li>- Results of student surveys/focus groups and graduate surveys including the quality of support to students and general student satisfaction with the program (<b>Process, Product</b>)</li> <li>- Employer surveys and focus groups (<b>Product</b>)</li> <li>- Society need and student demand (<b>Presage</b>)</li> <li>- How program addresses issues of diversity and inclusion (<b>Presage, Process</b>)</li> </ul>	Moderate modifications <b>Fitness for Purpose</b> (as per modifications)

University of Toronto	- Assessment of the programs relative to the best of their kind offered in Canada, North America, and internationally ( <b>Presage</b> )	Minimal modifications <b>Exceptional</b> (as per QAF)
Western University	- No additional indicators	Minimal modifications <b>Exceptional</b> (as per QAF)
Wilfrid Laurier University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Indication of whether all courses are necessary to meet curricular objectives (<b>Presage</b>)</li> <li>- Thesis, major paper, coursework only opportunities for honours and masters programs (<b>Process</b>)</li> <li>- Number of honours thesis completions (<b>Product</b>)</li> <li>- Number of courses with tutorials/labs (<b>Process</b>)</li> <li>- Amount of service teaching and professional service (<b>Presage; Process</b>)</li> <li>- Curricular relation between undergraduate and graduate programs (<b>Presage</b>)</li> <li>- GPAs of incoming students (<b>Presage</b>)</li> <li>- Evidence of achievement of program learning outcomes (<b>Process or Product; dependent on metrics used</b>)</li> </ul>	Moderate modifications <b>Fitness for Purpose &amp; Value for Money</b> (as per modifications)

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\* NSSE = National Survey on Student Engagement

\*\* CGPSS = Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey

\*\*\* Guelph suggests inclusion of outcome assessment indicators, but provides examples of output indicators (percentage of students going on to graduate or professional schools from its undergraduate program(s), the success of students in award competitions, the percentage of students involved in internships and/ or practica, and employment postgraduation, etc.).

The limited value placed on actual teaching is indicative of quality as exceptional; as Harvey and Green (1993) note in their discussion of this form of quality, “teaching may be unexceptional—the knowledge is there, it can be assimilated” (p. 12). The notion of exceptionality, then, is not dependent (largely) on effective teaching and learning, but rather on the quality of faculty themselves; thus, the QAF’s suggested faculty indicators align most closely with quality as exceptional.

The suggested indicators regarding students and graduates are primarily product variables (attrition rates; time-to-completion; final-year academic achievement; graduation rates; academic awards; rates of graduation, employment 6 months and 2 years after graduation, postgraduate study, and skills match and alumni reports). These indicators provide little information regarding faculty teaching and student learning, or even, the achievement of learning outcomes and degree level expectations. Though product variables commonly align with quality as fitness for purpose, these suggested indicators do not align with the QAF’s intended purposes (increased accountability demonstrated through achievement of DLEs, increased transferability of Ontario degrees, and quality enhancement). These metrics provide little to no context for the learning processes or content. The scant emphasis on the teaching process and greater value on quality outputs, again, is suggestive of a conception of quality as exceptional (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Some universities included additional indicators of quality in the modifications they made to the QAF’s suggested list of indicators. Our analysis of the additional indicators found in the universities’ IQAPs, along with the conception of quality they most represent, are included in Table 2. For example, in addition to the evaluation criteria and the suggested quality indicators provided in the QAF, Ryerson also considers current



and anticipated societal need and assesses existing and anticipated student demand when conducting program reviews. While these variables may be categorised as presage, they address quality as fitness for purpose with respect to both the institution (i.e., Ryerson's own aim to deliver a relevant curriculum) and the student's own career and academic goals. Furthermore, Ryerson also suggests including results from employer survey and focus groups to ensure relevance of its curriculum and the achievement of its students' career objectives, thereby aligning this additional product variable with quality as fitness for purpose. Ryerson's evaluation criteria also include additional process indicators regarding experiential learning opportunities and student surveys and focus groups, which consider both the quality of support given to students and general student satisfaction with the program. This emphasis on the student and the student learning process aligns these variables with quality as transformation.

Additional metrics included in all universities' IQAPs should be considered alongside their conceptions of quality, relating metrics and conceptions. Table 3 summarizes and demonstrates alignment of conceptions of quality articulated by institutions' mission statements, IQAP preambles, and suggested quality indicators and evaluation criteria. Only two universities that adapted the list of quality indicators for their IQAPs aligned these three components adequately and consistently with fitness for purpose—University of Guelph and Ryerson University. Of the universities that simply adopted the suggested indicators largely as written in the QAF, Queen's University, University of Toronto, and Western University demonstrated a high level of alignment among mission, IQAP preamble, and quality indicators that pointed to an understanding of quality as exceptional.

Table 3

*Alignment of Conceptions of Quality With Quality Indicators*

Institution	Concept of quality		Focus of IQAP indicators
	University mission statements	IQAP preamble	
Brock University	Exceptional	Exceptional Value for money	Transformation*
Carleton University	Transformation Exceptional	Fitness for purpose	Exceptional^
University of Guelph	Transformation Fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose*
Laurentian University	Fitness for purpose Transformation	Fitness for purpose	Exceptional^
McMaster University	Transformation	Transformation	Exceptional^
Queen's University	Exceptional	Exceptional	Exceptional^
Ryerson University	Fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose Exceptional	Fitness for purpose*
University of Toronto	Fitness for purpose Exceptional	Exceptional	Exceptional^
Western University	Exceptional Transformation	Exceptional	Exceptional^
Wilfrid Laurier University	Transformation	Fitness for purpose	Fitness for purpose* Value for money*

\*Institutions that made moderate modifications to the list of IQAP quality indicators as compared to the suggested list from the QAF.

^Institutions that made few or no modifications to the suggested list of indicators from the QAF; perceived alignment for these institutions may be intentional or may have occurred by happenstance.

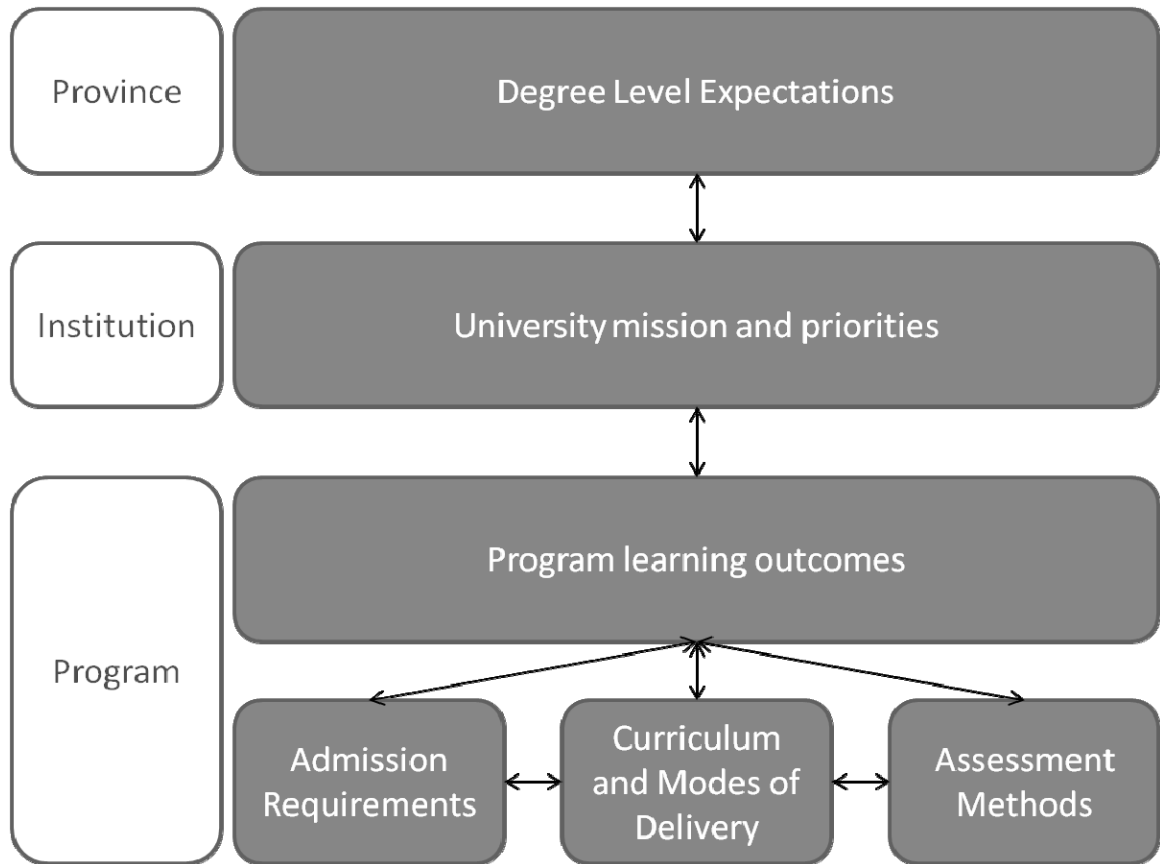
## Discussion

The notion of alignment between espoused theory and the university practices is not novel (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Diamond, 1998, 1999; Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; Hénard & Roseveare, 2012; Hinton, 2012; Kuh et al., 2004; Ramsden, 2003; Reeves, 2006). Biggs's (2001) approach to quality assurance, for example, relies heavily on aligning the stated goal(s) and the process in order to achieve the desired outcome.

As discussed previously, quality assurance in the province-wide context is intended to increase public accountability and increase international transferability of Ontario degrees through the achievement of degree level expectations. Province-wide quality here is approached as fitness for purpose: quality is achieved within Ontario when university programs produce the above outcomes. In accordance to Biggs (2001), the QAF, then, should be a *process* that aligns to these goals to produce the desired outcome. A quality program, as interpreted by the QAF, needs to demonstrate

clarity and appropriateness of the program's requirements and associated learning outcomes in addressing the institution's own undergraduate or graduate Degree Level Expectations [and the...] appropriateness of the program's admission requirements, modes of delivery, and program structure for the learning outcomes established for completion of the program. (OUCQA, 2010, p. 19).

This framework, therefore, is strongly focused on alignment in order to ensure quality and fulfill Ontario's higher education needs. This aligned quality assurance system, as we understand it, is depicted visually in Figure 4.



*Figure 4.* Visual representation of the alignment requirements from Ontario's Quality Assurance Framework.

The remaining QAF evaluation criteria (resources, quality indicators, and additional criteria for graduate programs) are not indicative of this alignment to QAF's goals and its espoused theory of quality as fitness for purpose. As described earlier, the quality indicators and additional criteria for graduate programs are primarily presage and product variables (Gibbs, 2010). These indicators provide little evidence of achievement of DLEs, or, more significantly, how admission requirements, modes of delivery, and program structure align with program learning outcomes and, consequently, DLEs. For example, faculty research record and qualification and student time-to-completion do not demonstrate how a program is producing the desired, province-wide expectations. The listed indicators are predominantly indicative of an exceptional conception of quality. This misalignment within the QAF can result in distorted or confused priorities that, according to Biggs (2001), can be deleterious to quality teaching and learning and may lead to the downgrading of quality rather than the enhancement of it. Significantly, institutional focus is misdirected to provide data that are not indicative of QAF's notion of quality.

While the QAF imposes the above model of quality assurance (Figure 4), it also provides institutions with some flexibility to adapt the framework in order to address province-wide expectations regarding quality and their own institutional conceptions of quality. Therefore, the suggested indicators, though they do not address province-wide notions of quality, may be indicative of institutional conceptions of quality. We will now explore how (and whether) the suggested quality indicators in the QAF and IQAPs align with institutional espoused theories.

Our results indicated little intentional alignment between the institutions' conceptions of quality and the suggested quality indicators present in their IQAPs. Significantly, while the QAF allows for flexibility and it is likely that they provided a list of quality indicators, as a suggestion, for institutions to draw from, there has been a tendency for each university to adopt the suggested indicators into the requirements of their IQAPs. Because these indicators denote exceptionalism, this duplication was perhaps fortuitous for those universities that hold this conception of quality (Queen's, Toronto, and Western); whether this alignment was intentional or a mere consequence of duplicating the QAF's suggested list is unknown.

The quality indicators suggested within the QAF serve little purpose in demonstrating quality as the QAF seems to define it: as fitness for purpose. The internal inconsistencies and misalignment within the QAF policy document were perpetuated and amplified when the IQAPs were created. Many institutions duplicated the quality indicators as suggested by the QAF (Laurentian, McMaster, Queen's, Toronto, and Western) and thus portrayed a conception of quality as exceptional. In fact, only three universities made modifications to prioritize specific requirements to include evidence of learning outcomes (Brock, Guelph, and Wilfrid Laurier), even though the QAF suggested that it was particularly interested in evidence of achievement of programs' expected or intended learning outcomes.

This lack of adaptation of the QAF by institutions may, in turn, result in a misaligned quality assurance system, potentially holding consequences. For front-line faculty involved in teaching students every day, this lack of clarity may lead to distorted or confused institutional priorities and these misaligned QA priorities can direct focus

away from the core teaching and learning functions of the university. Significantly, a lack of consistency in policy documents and processes result in confused priorities, which may, in turn, manifest as a lack of coherence in the institutional culture in the form of disjointed practices and miscommunication among members of the institution.

Institutional focus (specifically, financial and human resources) may be allocated to providing data that hold little relevance to assuring quality at both the province-wide and institutional levels.

The QAF aims to assure quality in order to enhance quality by conceptualizing quality primarily as fitness for purpose. By identifying and addressing issues of misalignment within its document and within the institutional QA processes that ensued, Ontario universities may be able to not only assure quality, but to truly enhance teaching and learning.

### **Recommendations**

Here we provide a series of recommendations that emerged from the analysis of conceptions and indicators of quality in Ontario's QAF and IQAP documents.

**Confirm and make explicit the meaning of quality.** First, it is important that Quality Council review the QAF and ensure that the meaning of quality elucidated from its framework is the meaning of quality they intended to portray. It would be prudent to conduct further research to determine how various stakeholder groups interpret the meaning of quality from the QAF.

Quality Council should also encourage Ontario's universities to be more explicit in articulating their own conceptions of quality and espoused theories of teaching and learning. The QAF could facilitate institutional conversations about the meaning of

quality and the priority of teaching and learning. Embedded within the IQAP could be the space to encourage holistic reflection on the alignments between academic programs and institutional conceptions of quality, priorities, mission, and vision. The Quality Council should recognize, too, that one concept of quality may be too limiting and institutional priorities may (and should) manifest as multiple conceptions of quality. Future research that aims to explore the variety of meanings that quality has for different stakeholder groups would be warranted. For example: What ways do faculty, staff, students, parents, employers, government, or funding bodies conceptualize quality?

**Review that the suggested list of quality indicators are reflective of the conception of quality and goal of QAF.** Alignment between conceptions and indicators of quality within the QAF should be reviewed with attention to revising the quality indicators requirements. Where indicators are deemed to play a central role in demonstrating quality as fitness for purpose, they should be embedded as requirements within the relevant sections of the IQAP. For example, metrics associated with admissions might be included in section 4.3.2, but only inasmuch as they provide evidence that justifies admission requirements in relation to potential for achieving learning outcomes. To better align with their fitness for purpose conception of quality, Quality Council should find ways to emphasize the inclusion of product variables that are focused on learning outcomes achievement, and de-emphasize the inclusion of presage indicators.

The QAF could necessitate that institutions purposefully select from and adapt the list of possible indicators to fit their own contexts and discourage the current practice where institutions have adopted the use of all suggested indicators. Indeed, relevant



quality indicators need to be identified or developed to address both province-wide and institutional needs. Not only administrators, but students, faculty, and other relevant stakeholders should be included in this work. Future researchers might ask of these various stakeholders: How do their conceptions of quality relate to the ways in which they contribute to quality education?

**Consider teaching and learning as a transformative and value-added process.** While including product variables would be valuable to addressing the learning outcomes that are achieved, Quality Council is encouraged to consider also that teaching and learning are transformative and value-added processes, and that perhaps a blended conception of quality that incorporates both fitness for purpose and transformation might better enable a focus on continuous improvement. Too much emphasis on product at the expense of the process might be detrimental to quality enhancement, and may misdirect or even waste administrative and faculty efforts by providing data of little use for improving the processes of teaching and student learning (Gibbs, 2010).

“Quality enhancement (QE) is about getting teachers to teach better” (Biggs, 2001, p. 227). Biggs (2001) argues that institutional focus should not be placed on teachers (i.e., research record, qualifications), but rather, on “teaching that leads to learning” (p. 224). Quality enhancement, therefore, is embedded in the process of learning. If an institution aims to enhance quality, as the QAF argues it should, emphasis needs to be placed on identifying and using process variables. Outcome and product variables can provide evidence of effective teaching, but they do provide adequate information regarding the *process* of teaching. Biggs’s notion of quality assurance necessitates alignment between stated goal, process, and outcome; however overreliance

on achievement of learning outcomes can, at best, be a proxy for the process of learning. Significantly, while this aligned system assures quality, it may not *enhance* quality; quality enhancement mechanisms require improvement of current practice (Biggs, 2001) (i.e., current process), thereby necessitating the use of process variables and metrics. Future researchers might conduct case studies of institutions that are successful in shifting culture and improving practices. It would be equally important to review other institutional policies and processes in relation to the IQAP and overall institution mission. Some reward structures, for example, tenure and promotion, are often based on ranking and reputational metrics that include research output indicators and operate against quality enhancement through academic development that might improve teaching. What policies changes will have the most impact on changing institutional culture and drawing attention to teaching and making quality enhancement of learning a visible priority? Future researchers might consider using a forthcoming Teaching Culture Perception Survey (PIF Quality Teaching Culture Project, forthcoming) to assess cultural impacts of policy and document changes.

### **Conclusions**

While we recognize that further analysis is necessary to explore the experiences, behaviours, and actions related to quality assurance, this study focused on exploring the internal consistency and alignment within quality assurance documents. We found that there are some inconsistencies in the QAF between how quality is conceptualized and how it is measured that can lead to distorted priorities and confused directions. These inconsistencies between conceptions and indicators of quality were largely perpetuated and amplified by Ontario's universities when they developed their institutional quality

assurance documents. Few universities adapted the suggested list of indicators, demonstrated an alignment between their conceptions and indicators of quality, and focused on the conception of quality advocated by Quality Council: quality as fitness for purpose. The other universities either showed misalignment between conceptions and indicators of quality or their alignment may have been the result of adopting the suggested indicators from the QAF that by chance happened to align with their exceptional view of quality.

It would be a good idea to step back from the pressures of demonstrating and documenting quality and reassess what Quality Council and each of Ontario's universities believes about quality. Ultimately, institutional conceptions should align with their institutional mission statements and should be reflective in the quality assurance processes they adopt, particularly in the metrics and indicators they use to demonstrate and ideally to enhance the quality of teaching and learning at their institutions. As quality assurance continues to be emphasized as a priority in university education provincially, nationally, and globally, it is important to explore what quality means within quality assurance policies, and how the meaning is interpreted by various stakeholder groups. In the midst of all political, economic, and international demands to demonstrate the quality of postsecondary education, we should be focusing on not only assuring quality, but enhancing the process of both teaching and learning.

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## **CHAPTER FIVE: UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS' CONCEPTIONS OF QUALITY AND APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE<sup>4</sup>**

The quality of education that students receive from a university is emerging as a global priority in academia (Altbach, 2010; Blackmur, 2010; Harvey & Knight, 1996). There are new interests in creating policies, processes, and frameworks to help assure and account for this educational quality (Berryhill, Linney, & Fromewick, 2009; Canadian Council on Learning, 2009; Harvey, 2006, 2007), which has resulted in quality assurance (QA) policies and processes being created or revised as universities in many countries are working towards both demonstrating that their university programs are 'of quality' and enhancing the quality of university teaching and learning (Ewell, 2010; Lechleiter, 2009).

If, however, policies and processes are meant to assure quality within the context of university education, it would be prudent to consider what is meant by quality, as defining quality is actually quite difficult. Not only is its definition often vague or absent from the very documents and policies that purport to assure its existence, quality is also a contested term that takes on different meanings to different stakeholder groups (Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Van Hout, 2013; Newton, 2002). Harvey and Green (1993) have identified a variety of meanings for quality: Quality as exceptional, quality as perfection (or perfectly consistent), quality as value for money, quality as fit for purpose, and quality as transformation.

While some research has been conducted to determine how quality is defined and conceptualized in the European and Australian postsecondary context (Harvey, 2006; Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996; Kelijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Van

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<sup>4</sup> I am the sole author of this manuscript. At the time of submitting this thesis, this manuscript has not yet been submitted for publication.

Hout, 2014; Newton, 2002, 2010), there is a significant gap in the Canadian literature on what conceptions and operational definitions of quality are used within a higher education context within Canada.

Within the province of Ontario, QA has been getting much attention: Universities within Ontario recently implemented a province-wide Quality Assurance Framework (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance [OUQCA], 2010). It is a framework that implies, but does not clearly define or articulate, what quality means (Goff & Siddiqui, forthcoming). In this study, I turn to Ontario university administrators that are responsible for QA at their institutions to explore what their conceptions, strategies, and approaches are related to university QA. Several questions guided this research: What conceptions of quality are held by university administrators responsible for QA? What strategies do they use to implement QA processes at their institutions? What varying approaches do university administrators adopt in implementing QA processes?

Using a phenomenographic approach and considering both conceptions and strategies, I found three broad approaches that are currently being used in some of Ontario's universities: An approach aimed at Defending Quality, an approach aimed at Demonstrating Quality, and an approach aimed at Enhancing Quality. These approaches are later considered in relation to Biggs's (2001) ideas about quality enhancement and a revision to his model is proposed.

### **Background**

Within Canada, Ontario universities were proactive in recognizing a need to update the QA processes within their institutions. The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) recognized the changes that were occurring internationally and sought to build

upon the rigorous program approval and internal review processes that already existed through Ontario's Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC) and the Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (OCGS). The COU collaboratively articulated province-wide degree level expectations for bachelors, honours, masters, and doctoral degrees that aligned with international standards and enabled international transferability of degrees. This articulation represented a major shift towards the promotion of a student outcomes focus. The COU endorsed and began implementing a new Quality Assurance Framework (OUCQA, 2010) that effectively replaced the UPRAC and OCGS processes. Under the auspices of the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), each publicly assisted university in Ontario was required to develop and implement its own Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) that is consistent with its institutional mission.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Two seminal and relevant contributions to the literature provided the framework through which this study was analyzed: Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptions of quality and Biggs's (2001) model for retrospective and prospective approaches to QA.

#### **Harvey and Green's Conceptions of Quality**

Harvey and Green (1993) identified five main definitions or conceptions of quality: quality as exceptional, quality as perfectly consistent, quality as value for money, quality as fitness for purpose, and quality as transformation.

With the *quality as exceptional* conception, quality is seen as something that is distinctive and excellent, often considered to be gold standard or the best. It is not easily definable, but assumed to be easily recognizable as the one that is the best. It is most often measured in terms of reputation and rankings.

When quality is considered something that is *perfectly consistent*, it often refers to the processes and conformity to specifications. Proponents of quality as perfection or consistency will likely strive to ensure there are zero defects in the process, which often results in products that are perfectly consistent or identical. Quality is assessed by adherence and conformity to standards in process, rather than measures of inputs or outputs; it is achieved when consistent and flawless outcomes are produced.

*Quality as fitness for purpose* relates directly to the intended purpose. In the context of higher education, the purpose may be connected to the students themselves and the learning outcomes they are meant to achieve; or the purpose may be related to the institutional mission. Either way, quality is achieved when the product or service meets stated purposes.

If *value for money* is the predominant conception of quality, quality will be assessed by a given return on investment. It is typically approached from an accountability perspective and relates to government funding and cost-effectiveness.

Finally, *quality as transformation* is conceptualized as a process of change—education is not a product, but a process that incurs change in (i.e., “transforms”) the student. Quality is approached with the expectation that there is an ongoing process of student transformation and enhancement. Attention is paid to the value added to students with respect to their own empowerment, autonomy, and critical thinking ability.

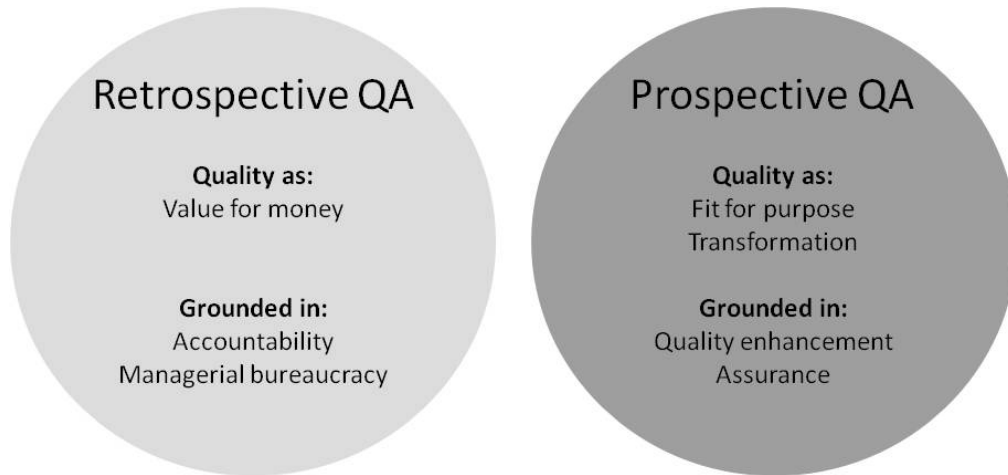
In the following study, Harvey and Green’s (1993) conceptions were considered and used to analyze how university administrators conceptualized quality. The strategies that administrators used in implementing QA processes were inductively analysed through emergent codes and themes. The intersection of conceptions and strategies were

considered and categorical approaches to QA were developed. These were compared to another seminal piece that Biggs (2001) contributed to the literature.

### **Biggs's Approaches to Quality Assurance**

Biggs (2001) discussed two main approaches to QA: Retrospective QA and Prospective QA. He argued for the use of a prospective approach to QA to encourage institutions to become more reflective and focused on enhancing teaching and learning. He recognized that there were three definitions of quality that had entered the QA debate. Quality as value for money, he suggested, is pivotal for what he described as retrospective QA. Retrospective QA, according to Biggs, is an approach that focuses on looking “back to what has already been done” (p. 222). It derives from demands for accountability and holds accountability in high priority. Its agenda is managerial, top-down, and bureaucratic and it is “not functionally concerned with the quality of teaching and learning” (p. 222).

Quality as fit for the purpose of the institution and quality as transforming, Biggs (2001) suggested, are pivotal for what he described as prospective QA. Prospective QA, rather than being focused on what has already been done, is forward-looking. It is “concerned with assuring that teaching and learning does now, and in future will continue, to fit the purpose of the institution. It also encourages continuing upgrading and improvement of teaching through quality enhancement (QE)” (p. 222). See Figure 5 for my summary of the differences and dichotomous nature of these two approaches.



*Figure 5.* Simplified visual representation summarizing the two approaches to quality assurance from Biggs (2001).

Findings from this current study suggest that Biggs (2001) might have oversimplified these approaches as they appear to be more complex in reality. Thus, in this paper, I will argue for a revision to Biggs's model and suggest how the current understanding of approaches to QA may hold relevance to policy and practice.

### **Methodology**

A phenomenographic methodology helped develop a deeper understanding of the variety of ways that QA processes are conceptualized, experienced, and described by the senior administrative QA policy actors. Phenomenography is the “empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, and conceptualize various phenomena in and aspects of the world around us” (Marton, 1994, p. 4428). It emerged as an approach to research during Marton's work with Roger Säljö, Lars Dahlgren, and Lennart Svensson on the different conceptions and approaches that university students take to learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976a, 1976b; Marton & Dahlgren, 1978; Marton & Svensson, 1978). While there are several forms of phenomenography, pure phenomenographic interest lies in describing how people conceive of various aspects of their reality, where participants' understandings of certain phenomena are explored.

Phenomenography is not phenomenology, nor is it an offspring of it. Marton (1988) and Simmons (2007) provide comprehensive analyses of how phenomenography is distinct from other research methods. It is not a first-person enterprise that is filtered through the researcher's lens and words, but rather uses second order data that are guided by the participants' voices. While phenomenology is focused on the commonalities of phenomenon to determine its essence, phenomenographers try to characterize the

variations of experience to understand the essence. Centering around conceptual thought rather than lived experience, phenomenography aims to collect accounts and perceptions of past experience, rather than experience as it is lived. So while it is unique in design, it does use grounded theory and inductive approaches whereby the researcher collects deep and rich data through conversational interviews. As the data are collected, the researcher simultaneously analyses the data by constructing analytic codes in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2008; Guba & Lincoln, 2005) or categories of description in phenomenography (Marton, 1988) that emerge from the data using a constant comparison method. Researchers aim to construct a collective analysis of the variety of meanings and perceptions of a particular phenomenon (Marton, 1981). The goal is not to construct an exact picture of reality, but rather, the participants' implicit meanings and experiential views are used to portray a construction of reality (Charmaz, 2006; Marton, 1988) or logical structure that relates the variety of meanings held of a particular phenomenon (Akerlind, 2005).

Important to phenomenographers is the relation between the conceptions and the experiences from which those conceptions originate (Marton, 1988). In identifying the limited number of qualitatively different ways in which something is experienced, phenomenographic research acts as a source of data which develops awareness of variation (Marton, 1994). It is grounded in the idea that people understand phenomena in a number of qualitatively different but interrelated ways (Bruce, 1997; Marton, 1986) and is concerned with describing things as they appear to and as they have been experienced by people.



## **Data Collection**

Prior to contacting possible participants, ethics clearance was obtained (Brock University REB File #12-157), and subsequently from each of the 10 purposefully selected institutions, where required. All necessary ethics clearances were obtained during the spring and summer of 2013.

**Site and participant selection.** Conducting this research with a phenomenographic approach, I set out to study the variety of ways in which senior administrators experience, understand, and conceptualize the QA phenomenon in Ontario universities. In this sense, it was important to include senior administrators that might offer a broad range of perceptions and experiences. I aimed to focus on the variations of their conceptions, experiences, and implementation strategies to better understand how QA processes (under the QAF) are being implemented. In phenomenographic research, Åkerlind (2002) advises that the sample of participants should be chosen to maximize the variation of experiences.

To maximize the likelihood of variation, I purposefully selected a wide variety of Ontario universities, and ultimately included 10 institutions that varied in location, type of institution, age of institution, and student population. In an attempt to recruit individuals with a variety of experiences, I first selected universities that were diversely distributed according to several characteristics: geography, student population size, and classification. The 10 selected institutions included three central universities, three western universities, two eastern universities, and two northern universities (approximating the distribution of universities in each region based upon MTCU's region maps). The selection also included three medical/doctoral, four comprehensive, and three

primarily undergraduate universities (*Macleans* categories) and is reflective of the percent of all Ontario universities in each category. Finally, the selection included a wide range of university sizes: three smaller universities (less than 10,000 students), three medium-sized universities (10,000-25,000 students), and four larger universities (greater than 25,000 students). These selected universities provided a fair distribution across Ontario, categorical class, and student population.

I contacted the Offices of the Provost to identify the key administrators who developed the IQAP or implemented the requirements under the QAF. Ten participants from seven Ontario universities were included in the study. In conducting phenomenographic research in higher education settings, Trigwell (2000) suggests that a minimum of 10 participants would be needed to create a reasonable chance of finding variation in perceptions.

**Participants.** The participant group included 10 administrators who were all actively responsible for some aspect of the institutional QA process. Participants held positions that ranged from managers to vice provosts and came to their current position with a variety of past experiences including teaching, research, administrative leadership, governance, and educational development. Some participants had experience with QA at the department level, some had institutional experience with program review processes through UPRAC and OCGS, some had experience as members of the Ontario Universities Council for Quality Assurance, and others had little to no experience working with QA prior to taking on their current position. Experience working directly with the QAF and IQAP varied in participants. Some had only in the past few months become familiar with the framework, while others had worked with the QAF and IQAP

prior to their implementation in 2011. A couple of participants had been involved in the development of the institutional structures and policies during the implementation phase in 2011. Participants' involvement in the QA process ranged from feeling quite removed from the day-to-day operations to feeling so immersed that they described QA as all that they do, making up their entire day-to-day jobs. Some participants were the sole person actively involved in implementing the QA process while others had the support of an assistant, a manager, or even an entire team or office. Participants reported being involved in supporting the QA process in a variety of ways, including developing and implementing the IQAP, leading transition to QAF, managing the QA process, ushering the governance process, supporting senate and various QA committees, modifying jurisdiction, scope, and representation on committees, chairing program review committees, advising faculty, acting as a resource, or working with faculty from start to finish. Some participants supported both undergraduate and graduate QA processes, while others supported one or the other. Most participants were engaged with at least some aspects of the cyclical program review, new program proposals, and modifications.

Since the nature of the study involved targeting very specific individuals in senior administrative positions, I have not named the institutions from which the participants were recruited, nor do I identify the gender of the individual participants. All participants, whether or male or female, have been given female pseudonyms in an effort to further protect confidentiality.

**Interviews.** In planning the interview questions and process, I turned to the work of other researchers who have conducted phenomenographic interviews. Interviews are the primary method of phenomenographic data collection. They are usually framed as

conceptual interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) that attempt to clarify the conceptual structure of participants' ideas of particular phenomena.

The interviews typically begin with planned open-ended questions, designed to reveal the different ways in which participants may understand the phenomenon under study (Bowden, 2000), but also to allow participants to choose the aspects of the question they want to answer. A set of planned questions is important in phenomenography, but so is interview flexibility as each interview often follows a different course (Bowden, 2000; Marton, 1986).

The interview guide (see Appendix B) was informed by my experiences and interactions I have had in providing guidance and resources for the program review process. For this reason, I was careful to construct open-ended questions that allowed participants to explore, reflect upon, and share their own experiences. The guiding questions explored the variations in participants' (a) experiences relating to the QA processes, (b) approaches taken and the decisions made to provide access to resources and data, (c) perceptions and conceptualizations of quality, and (d) cultural perspectives and values within the institution.

Once eligible participants had agreed to participate and had returned signed consent forms to participate in the research, an interview time was scheduled. The guiding interview questions were emailed to the participant at least 2 days in advance of the scheduled interview. Interviews, conducted by telephone or Skype, ranged in length from 40 minutes to 70 minutes, and averaged approximately 50 minutes. Interview lengths in this study reflect recommendations that phenomenographic interviews are typically 30-90 minutes (Kember, 1997), or according to Trigwell (2000), 40-60 minutes,

or until “the interviewer feels the experience has been described, and the meaning of relevant words has been revealed” (Trigwell, 2000, p. 67).

### **Data Analysis**

Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. Personal and potentially identifiable information were removed from the transcripts. The transcripts were returned to participants for member-checking prior to being uploaded to ATLAS.ti (version 7.1.4) for analysis.

Following a phenomenographic approach and Trigwell’s (2000) suggestions for analysis, I considered the transcripts as a set and used an iterative and comparative process that involved continually sorting and making ongoing comparisons (Åkerlind 2005, Simmons, 2007; Trigwell, 2000). The set of notes and quotes I made on each transcript were used to make sense of the range of comments and variations and similarities. I hierarchically arranged the summary notes into groups, first paying attention to possible conceptions of quality, then paying attention to the strategies used by participants in implementing quality assurance processes, and finally considering how those two dimensions or parts related to the whole of each transcript and the whole set of transcripts. Continually asking myself how the next transcript said something different or similar from the previous transcripts, I was able to code the different conceptions of quality and helped to define emergent categories that were similar but fundamentally different with respect to the strategies used by participants in implementing quality assurance processes. Through these processes, I was able to settle on a final set of categories of description that were appropriately supported by the data and took into

consideration the relationship between the two dimensions: conceptions of quality and implementation strategies.

I coded for Harvey and Green's (1993) conceptions and defined emergent categories that were similar but fundamentally different with respect to the strategies used by participants. In doing so, I was able to settle on a final set of categories of description that were appropriately supported by the data and took into consideration the relationship between the two dimensions: conceptions of quality and implementation strategies.

The set of robust categories of description, known as the outcome space (Trigwell, 2000), showed how the categories are internally related and described the variation within the group on both dimensions. I depicted the resultant outcome space from this study as a visual model comprised of findings from both the conception and strategy dimensions. These categories of description were formulated to construct a collective analysis of institutional QA experience and to identify the variations in conceptions of quality and strategies used to implement and resource QA processes.

### **Findings**

Before summarizing the findings of the study, an important note about the challenge of defining quality is warranted. Articulating a definition of quality was not an easy task. Participants in this study were directly asked what "quality" means to them in the context of higher education. This question was followed by long pauses of silence filled with rustling papers, shifting movements, and false starts and uncomfortable stutters. On one hand, this response was unexpected: Participants received a copy of the interview guide and had a chance to ponder the questions in advance. Why was it so difficult for them to provide commentary on what quality means? On the other hand,

there are no definitions of quality provided in the very documents that are meant to assure its existence. The QAF suggests metrics and indicators of quality, but does not attempt to provide a definition or description of its meaning. It leaves this task to the individual institutions to address. The institutions, however, also shied away from clearly articulating a clear definition or conception of quality. This avoidance was mimicked by the participants in this study. In some cases, participants chose to skip the question. For others, a simple declaration was made to say that they did not know or could not answer the question. Checking their notes provided a couple participants the confidence and ability to proceed with a response, though often with much hesitation and reservation.

Approaching this theme from another angle, I asked questions about participants' perceptions of the necessity and importance of QA in Ontario's universities today. I also asked questions that probed them to consider what elements suggest the existence of high-quality programs at their institutions. Responses to these more tangible questions were more forthcoming. These questions were not only met with more confident and thoughtfully considered responses, they also provided an indication of how the participants might inherently conceptualize quality. They provided a more concrete way of describing quality without formally articulating its meaning or definition. Perhaps this is the same experience that authors of the QAF and IQAP documents had: They were able to provide metrics and indicators of quality, but chose not to include a formal definition for it.

What follows next is the presentation of results from the study, organized into two main dimensions: The conceptions of quality held by participants and the strategies that participants used in implementing and resourcing QA processes within their institutions.

## Conceptions of Quality

Harvey and Green (1993) have identified five main definitions or conceptions of quality: quality as exceptional, quality as perfection (or perfectly consistent), quality as value for money, quality as fit for purpose, and quality as transformation. Evidence from this study supported the existence of only the following four of these conceptions:

**Quality as exceptional.** Participants who held this conception of quality often held beliefs that the quality of their academic programs is excellent and commented on their excellent faculty members and top-notch resources. For example, Carolyn shared her perceptions by saying “I think the high quality of the physical resources and also the faculty members that are doing the program get the most attention from our reviewers.”

Hannah reflected: “We are striving for the gold standard in whatever the discipline is for our students... and wanting to be leaders in the range of the programs that we offer. That’s an overarching theme for us.” She pondered over questions like: “What steps are we taking to ensure that our students are number one?”

During her interview, Robin commented that some the important indicators of quality to her are the high admission standards, number of students on the dean’s honours list, high averages, number of awards, and applicant–registrant ratios. These are some of the metrics used in establishing university rankings, league tables, and reputation, and thus suggest a conception of quality as exceptional.

**Quality as value for money.** As Leah exemplified in the following quote, quality here is typically approached from an accountability perspective and is related to government funding and cost-effectiveness. She stated that “It is across postsecondary landscape, accountability is the big word because of the rising costs. It has become



exceedingly expensive to go to university. If it is exceedingly expensive, then it better be a good experience.” Leah elaborated by saying:

Yes, quality assurance is one of my key responsibilities and it’s a compliance issue, but to me, it’s part of a larger project of ensuring that we think deeply about our investment in student learning and that we ensure that we’re all on the same page about what we mean when we say quality... It’s partly a branding exercise and it’s partly also to ensure effective use of resources.

Hilary’s reflections also exemplify a notion of value for money:

If people are looking at higher education with an evidence-based mentality, then education is public .... If it’s something that we publicly fund, then there should be some measurable outcomes that we can point to in order to justify what's invested in it.

Lydia also reflected on quality as it relates to value for money at one point during her interview. “If the government is funding our universities” Lydia said, “they have a right to know that the money is being well spent.” Irene mentioned the notion of value for money with respect to the value of the review process and the cost of bringing reviewers to her university. However, all four of these participants held another concept of quality as well: Fitness for purpose.

**Quality as fitness for purpose.** The QAF largely takes a fitness for purpose perspective, thus it was difficult to ascertain whether participants were reiterating the epistemological underpinnings of the framework, or whether they personally believed that quality is exemplified in the notion of fitness for purpose. Where participants commented on fitness for purpose that went beyond the frameworks description of the

requirement, they were assumed to hold conceptions of quality that connected with fitness for purpose. For example, Lydia reflected on the importance of articulating and achieving learning outcomes by sharing her frustration with the lack of emphasis that external reviewers place on the fitness of the program in relation to its intended purpose. “It always amazes me how little reviewers will say about learning outcomes or curriculum alignment or learning outcomes assessment,” Lydia said; “That actually reduces the legitimacy of the process because the program may know that they don’t really have good learning outcomes or they aren’t really assessing them but the reviewers come in and they don’t say anything about it.”

Hilary recognized the importance of input and output metrics with a focus on the extent to whether “the curriculum very intentionally develops and reinforces them [learning outcomes], including certain skills and different kinds of knowledge.” Hilary continued by emphasizing the importance of standardized learning outcomes that provide “a relatively high degree of assurance that the students had learned the things that they said they were going to learn at the beginning.” Irene and Leah also spent time during their interviews discussing the importance of working with departments to not only develop clearly articulated learning outcome statements as required by the QAF, but they also emphasized the importance of demonstrating alignment and achievement of those learning outcomes. For example, Leah believed that her job is to ensure alignment, and as such, she works with programs in a hands-on way to help them in demonstrating this alignment. Irene has been working with departments for several years in helping them to articulate learning outcomes, map them, and demonstrate achievement of those intended learning outcomes. Both Leah and Irene seem to marry their perceptions about quality

with the work that they do, and as such, engage actively with faculty members to support QA work.

From the interview transcript data, it was not possible to tease apart and separate the concepts of fitness for purpose and value for money; those that reflected on quality as fitness for purpose also commented about the notion of value for money, and vice versa. However, it is possible that there may be a spectrum of beliefs. While Leah emphasized the value for money, Lydia emphasized the notion of fitness for purpose, and Hilary and Irene may fall somewhere in between.

**Quality as transformation.** Recall that this view of quality is based on the process of learning, continuous enhancement, and value added transformation. Caitlyn provides a great example: “For me it [quality] is about the education experience... Quality is the intrinsic value. That ability to be a critical thinker.” She discussed in her interview the value of the “progression through the years, with a focus on capstone or culminating experiences.” Similarly, Grace saw quality when she said that “the efforts of faculty and students really examining issues that they are truly having in their units and facing them.” She viewed “quality as the efforts, not necessarily of the outcome” and spoke about quality as a process—a process of examining the program and a process that leads to a transformative student experience. “In getting to some end product, the focus must be on the process,” Grace advised. Isabella mentioned reflection, student engagement, and transformation, and believed that “a quality program is one that is constantly able to rein in the tendencies to understand where each piece is developmentally for the student.”

**Quality as perfect consistency.** This concept of quality focuses on the processes and conformity to specifications, often striving for zero defects in the process (Harvey & Green, 1993). There was no support for this definition from the participants in this study.

Perceptions held of quality were interpreted by the ways in which participants provided descriptions of high quality programs or indicators that they believed were indicative of quality. It became clear that these perceptions were related in some way with the participants' strategies in implementing QA processes. Thus, next I describe the variations in these strategies and then later use the two dimensions (conceptions and strategies) to build an outcomes matrix.

### **Strategies Used in Implementing Quality Assurance**

In the past section, the participants' conceptions of quality were interpreted on the basis of conceptions that were previously discussed in the literature (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996). This section outlines the strategy dimension, with hierarchically leveled categories that emerged from the data. By considering the implementation strategies adopted by administrators and the rationale for such strategies, it was possible to construct three levels that may help understand how administrators approached QA at their institutions. The levels were hierarchically arranged according to increasing support for the QA process and increasing focus on student engagement, enhancement, and reflection.

**Level 1 strategy: Decentralized support with focus on accountability.** Some administrators preferred to implement the QAF in a decentralized way. They set systems in place to remain hands-off and disengaged from the day-to-day operations of QA, expecting departments and faculties to take on the QA work. They focused their efforts

on ensuring that the framework requirements were met and maintained administrative oversight of the process. There was little to no mention of student engagement and student experience. Robin, who saw her role as an administrative stage-manager, shared these impressions:

If you compare the proposal that's on my desk now with what would have gone in for approval 5 years ago, it's night and day. The newer version of course speaks to accountability and the i's are dotted, the t's are crossed. It's so accountable, the homework is done on all counts.

Carolyn shared that her university takes a decentralized approach, leaving it up to the faculties to complete the program reviews. She saw her role as a contact person who can help answer administrative questions about what needs to be included in the self-study documentation. Hannah also took an administrative focus, but added that "Students themselves deserve as much clarity as we can offer about the kinds of things that they are going to learn and how this will facilitate and enable them to move forward." Hannah's focus on students is in demonstrating accountability to them and while she seemed to be primarily focused on administrative accountability, she may have been expressing a strategy that reflects some aspects of the second level.

**Level 2 strategy: Engaged support with focus on accountability.** Participants exemplifying a Level 2 strategy preferred to implement the QAF in a centralized way. They developed centralized resources and ensured that appropriate people (themselves or others) offered hands-on support. They engaged closely with faculty and supported them as they developed their self-studies and when they implemented their action plans. They focused their efforts on ensuring that framework requirements were met, but also

recognized the importance of demonstrating accountability to students and the public.

Hilary explained:

Under the old system it was very much the people in the academic departments responsible for the reviews who had to go and find the stuff they needed. [We have] taken an active role in being the one point of contact to gather the materials together, to make contact with the key resources, whether it's an institutional analysis or what have you. ... It has to stand between serving the needs of people in the institution who are developing or reviewing programs, but then also maintaining fidelity with the framework and with our policies. It's done a good job of balancing those two things.

Irene's accountability focus is connected to ensuring there is follow-through with the implementation plans that come out of a cyclical program review. She thinks that the new QA process "provides an opportunity to ensure that you actually move forward on some of the recommendations that are deemed to be important ... and there's the plan in place to have accountability to individuals for ensuring that it goes forward." Lydia, who works at a university that provides a centralized service, thought that "units should be accountable to what they are providing to students". She thought that programs "shouldn't be a mish-mash of what faculty want to teach" and followed up by acknowledging that ad-hoc curriculum design "may have been acceptable in the past when the role that the university played was different, but the role of the university has changed and that needs to be acknowledged." To each of these participants, students are important, but the focus is primarily on demonstrating accountability to them.

**Level 3 strategy: Engaged support with focus on reflection and enhancement.**

Caitlyn, Grace, and Isabella preferred to implement the QAF in a centralized way. They developed centralized resources and systems that allowed for them to provide extensive support to departments and units from their centralized office. They focused their efforts and attention on developing capacity within departments and units with a strong emphasis on holistic reflection, student learning experiences, and continuous enhancement. Caitlyn believes “in providing as much support as possible... it really is about coordinated support”. At her institution, they think of the centralized support they provide as “a one stop shop”. Caitlyn also commented:

I think there's value in taking time to reflect and improve the academic programs for the students and for society at large. I think there's great value in taking a moment to reflect and being critical of the program and how it can be improved for program review. When you're developing a program, there's no question you need to take that time to have a very coordinated effort in developing that program.

Grace expressed similar views when she said “it is all about program improvement. We always try to change the conversation. We don't talk about accountability. We talk about program improvements”. At her institution, they encourage departments “to examine their program and to make program enhancements... That is how we frame the conversation.”

Likewise, Isabella was focused on asking the big questions about why we are doing what we are doing, and in doing so, thought

that students need to be consulted about how they're learning and taught to think about how they're learning. ... They are not the sole arbiters about what they should be learning. ... Faculty members need to learn how to talk to them about why they're doing what they're doing with them. It's a pedagogical foundational rule. ... Whatever your pedagogical method is, it has to be absolutely appropriate to the kinds of goals you have and objectives you have and that facilitate the learning.

Unique to this Level 3 strategy is not only the focus on considering the student learning experience and accountability to students, but the desire to involve and engage students in the process of quality enhancement. This evidence, along with data from Level 2 that emphasized the importance of being accountable to students and focusing on student experiences, suggests a hierarchy, with levels arranged by increasing focus on students. At the low end, Level 1 strategies were least focused on student learning experiences and student engagement while Level 3 was the most focused on students. This increased focus parallels an increasing level of engagement in providing supports and resources to departments and units and increasing advocacy for using the QA process for reflecting upon and enhancing the academic programs being offered by the institution.

Earlier I mentioned that what emerged from the data was the appearance of a relationship between the participants' perceptions of quality and their ways of approaching QA. This relationship is explored in the following matrix (Table 4) which aligns the four conceptions of quality in the first dimension with the three hierarchically leveled strategies used in implementing QA.



Table 4

*Outcomes Matrix Relating Conceptions of Quality and Strategies\* Used in Implementing Quality Assurance*

Conception of quality	Strategy for QA		
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Exceptional	Defending quality		
Value for money & Fitness for purpose	Demonstrating quality		
Transformation	Enhancing quality		

\*Level 1 Strategy: Decentralized support with focus on accountability

Level 2 Strategy: Engaged support with focus on accountability

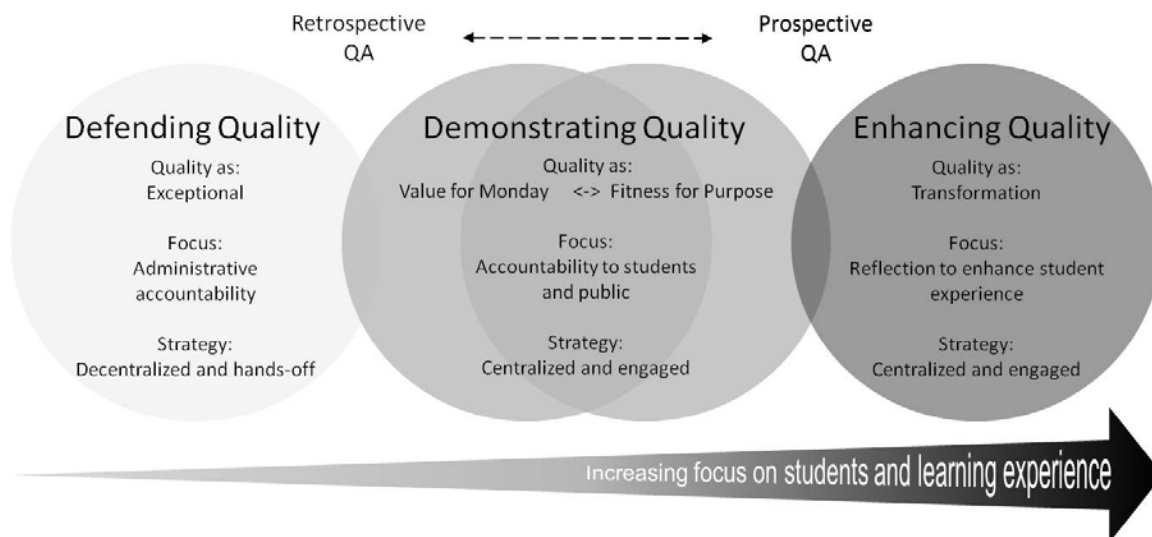
Level 3 Strategy: Engaged support with focus on reflection and enhancement

### **Relationship Between Dimensions and the Development of a Model**

Relating participants' conceptions of quality with the strategies they used in implementing QA showed some clear linkages (Table 4). The participants who have taken a decentralized approach to QA and focused primarily on the administrative aspects of the QAF and accountability are the same participants whose concepts of quality connected predominantly with the notion of quality as exceptional. The participants who provided the most engaged support with a strong emphasis on reflection and enhancement seemed to hold perceptions and beliefs that quality is demonstrated through its ability to provide the value-added element of transformation. The middle group of participants who blended engaged centralized approaches with a focus on accountability held varying perceptions of quality. These participants discussed elements of quality in relation to the notion of value for money and fitness for purpose. This middle group may be transitional in nature, representing a spectrum of movement from one approach to another over time, or perhaps a more attuned recognition of the variety of conceptions of quality and variety of implementation strategies.

From this matrix, I developed a model that may represent three main approaches to QA in higher education using the intersections of conceptions and strategies (Table 4; Figure 6): Defending Quality, Demonstrating Quality, and Enhancing Quality.

Participants that reflected a Defending Quality approach held concepts of quality that were predominantly connected to notions of exceptional and tended to talk about quality as related to their reputation of being the best institution, having the best programs, or attracting the best students. They focused on the administrative and accountability aspects of the process and took decentralized and hands-off strategies.



*Figure 6.* Model depicting three approaches to quality assurance, considering conceptions of quality, focus, and implementation strategy.

There is some evidence, especially in the case of Hannah, that the Defending Quality and Demonstrating Quality approaches are not fully exclusive of each other. Participants who predominantly typified a Demonstrating Quality approach seemed to hold two concepts of quality—value for money and fitness for purpose—however, as Leah and Lydia exemplify, they may connect more with one concept than the other. These individuals tended to focus on portraying quality as a way of demonstrating some accountability to students and the public and felt it was important to show that the programs offered to students met their goals or outcomes and provided students with some level of accomplishment for the investment they made in their education. Demonstrating Quality, in this sense, was implemented through centralized approaches to QA in which these individuals engaged readily with departments and units to provide supports and resources.

Participants who adopted an Enhancing Quality approach mentioned notions of quality as fitness for purpose or value for money to some extent, but they predominantly discussed quality in relation to its ability to provide value-added transformative element to students. They focused on the value of reflection and aimed to identify ways that students were empowered or their educational programs enhanced them in some way. They, like the participants who were focused on a Demonstrating Quality approach, also adopted centralized and engaged strategies to supporting QA processes at their institutions. However, in the Enhancing Quality approach, there was a very prominent focus working with faculty members across the campus to enhance the student learning experience.

### **Discussion**

The main approaches to QA that emerged from this study may contribute a necessary modification to a theoretical model of the reflective institution (Biggs, 2001).

The dichotomous approaches suggested by Biggs (2001) may be more complex in reality and, based on findings from this study, should include a fourth definition of quality that was espoused by senior administrators in Ontario's universities: quality as exceptional. Thus, I argue for a revision to Biggs's model and suggest how the current understanding of approaches to QA may hold relevance to policy and practice.

Data from the current study suggested that there is a gap in Biggs's (2001) model. The conception of quality as exceptional, present in how some senior QA administrators view quality, is missing from Biggs's model. The data suggest here that this conception is related to the retrospective QA approach in a defensive manner. Data further suggested that Biggs's prospective QA may be more complex than what he originally suggested. Fundamental differences existed in participants to held conceptions of quality as transformation versus as fitness for purpose. The model I propose redefines Biggs's retrospective and prospective approaches to QA into at least three approaches to QA: Defending Quality, Demonstrating Quality, and Enhancing Quality (Figure 6).

### **Defending Quality**

When administrators held conceptions of quality as exceptional, they adopted QA approaches that most closely met Biggs's (2001) description of retrospective QA. They seemed to "look back to what has already been done" (Biggs, 2001, p. 222) and they aimed to demonstrate excellence and distinction. They, like retrospective QA proponents, took managerial approaches, with accountability as a high priority. Their procedures were more top-down and bureaucratic. Similar to the proponents of Biggs's retrospective QA, participants who adopted Defending Quality approaches may "talk as if they are concerned with educational quality in the sense of 'fit for the purpose'" (Biggs, 2001, p.

222), but they do not adopt procedures that fit this concept. Instead the approaches they adopt, as Biggs suggested, are “frequently counter-productive for quality in the sense of providing rich teaching contexts and enhanced learning outcomes” (p. 222). Connected closely with the Defending Quality approach was the tendency to focus on the administrative functions of QA rather than prioritizing the importance of quality teaching and enhanced student learning experiences.

Defending Quality approaches inherently included these same backward-looking, accountability-driven approaches of retrospective QA, but conceptions of quality were grounded in the notion of quality as exceptional. They are evident either by the way proponents of such an approach talked about quality as distinctive, exclusive, elite, or as embodied in excellence (Harvey & Green, 1993). These views underpin the elitist view of high quality that is determined by the distinctiveness and perhaps even the inaccessibility of such an education, whereby only the very best students are able to gain access. Quality is judged by reputation, by the level of resources and quality of inputs, and by meeting indicators that reflect distinction.

There may be fundamental differences between those who conceptualize quality as exceptional compared with those who view quality as value for money. In this study, there were no participants who conceptualized quality primarily as value for money and took retrospective, accountability-driven approaches to QA.

### **Demonstrating Quality**

Biggs (2001) described prospective QA as an approach that is focused on maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning in the institution.

“Prospective QA is not concerned with quantifying aspects of the system, but with

reviewing how well the whole institution works in achieving its mission, and how it may be improved” (p. 223).

In this study, participants who conceptualized quality as value for money also simultaneously held conceptions of quality as fitness for purpose. Unlike Biggs’s separation of these two concepts into retrospective and prospective QA, the two concepts were inextricably linked in this study. Participants here held accountability as a primary focus, but in a different sense than those who adopted a Defending Quality approach. In the Defending Quality approach, the importance of accountability was described in terms of administrative and managerial accountability. In the Demonstrating Quality approach, the focus was on accountability to students and on an ability to meet the goals of the program and institution.

Another revision to Biggs’s model seems prudent: Conceptions of fitness for purpose and value for money in this study were both related to approaches that focus on accountability to students and ensuring that there is a continuing fit of their learning outcomes to the program’s and institution’s goals. This appears to be a blend of retrospective and prospective QA, as Biggs described it, grounded in the present and focused on assuring the quality of higher education in relation to current goals. This Demonstrating Quality approach is rooted in the provision of centralized and engaged services that actively seek to help articulate and document achievement of student learning outcomes that fit with both the institution’s and the department’s current purpose. Demonstrating Quality takes into consideration the current institutional priorities and current trends in higher education while valuing the quality of the learning experience for students.

## **Enhancing Quality**

Another approach emerged from this study that incorporated the conceptions of quality as transformation and a clear priority focus on enhancing the student experience through reflection and transformation. This approach relates to Biggs's (2001) notion of prospective QA, but rather than just reviewing the extent to which an institution, department or program is achieving its mission or goal, the approach of Enhancing Quality is grounded primarily in finding ways to continually enhance the educational experience for students. The importance of fitting the purpose is still relevant, but this approach takes a more forward-looking perspective that promotes and encourages the use of reflection to inspire continued enhancement.

Biggs (2001) makes a strong argument for the connection between prospective QA and the fitness for purpose conception. Data from this study, however, suggest that it is the administrators that hold conceptions of quality as transformation that are most focused on enhancing the student experience and are the most forward-looking. It was participants who adopted Enhancing Quality approaches that were most likely to promote the importance of reflection and the priority of improving the academic programs for students. They saw value in critical reflection for the purpose of program improvement. They strived to change conversations by asking questions and encouraging reflection around why we do what we do in teaching and learning and how pedagogical strategies align with the kinds of intended goals that exist for institutions and programs. Interestingly, this group of participants were the only ones who commented on the importance of involving students as partners in the process of quality enhancement, a



trend that is emerging internationally (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Fenten, 2014; Gibbs, 2013; Healey, Flint, & Harrington, 2014; National Union of Students, 2012).

In summary, Enhancing Quality approaches are ultimately focused on enhancing the quality of teaching and learning by emphasizing and promoting the use of reflection. Results from this study largely support Biggs's (2001) model of retrospective and prospective QA; however, they offer some evidence from administrators within Ontario universities that warrant some modifications to the prevailing theoretical model.

The dichotomous nature of Biggs's model (see Figure 5) seems to be, in reality, more complex. Rather than the two categories of retrospective or backward-looking QA and prospective or forward-looking QA, what has emerged is a more complex spectrum. The new model representing approaches to QA (see Figure 6) ranges from a retrospective Defending Quality approach that defends quality through to a present-focused Demonstrating Quality approach that aims to portray how quality is meeting current goals through to a more forward-looking or prospective Enhancing Quality approach that seeks to continuously enhance quality through reflection.

### **Implications for Policy, Practice, and Future Research**

A cultural shift may be one way to emphasize the importance of quality university teaching (Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, & Reason, 2009; Feldman & Paulsen, 1999; Hénard & Roseveare, 2012; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). It is thought that an institutional and departmental culture focused on improving teaching quality can improve student learning (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011). While it may be tempting to assess the impact of culture on its individual members, it is essential to develop an appreciation of the dynamics and relationship between individuals and institutional beliefs, values, and

practices (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Denison, 1996). Understanding and skillfully navigating institutional culture from an educational leadership perspective would be important in order to advance change initiatives (Kezar & Eckel, 2002), including the implementation of QA processes. To foster a reflective institution, as conceptualized by Biggs (2001), educational leaders can modify existing policies and encourage new practices that demonstrate the value that the institution places on quality teaching and learning. Such leaders would engage in critical reflection, identify opportunities and impediments, and then strive to remove factors within the institutional culture that are deleterious to learning or to high quality teaching. This study contributed some understanding of how senior university leaders approach quality assurance. Future research may investigate how departmental chairs approach quality assurance when their programs are being reviewed, or how faculty members engage in the quality assurance review process, or how students engage with quality enhancement.

To encourage the development of a campus culture that values the institution's function in student learning and quality teaching requires holistic consideration of the beliefs and perceptions held by all members of institution, not just the institutional leaders. A clear articulation of the institution's conceptions of quality and a critical analysis of how beliefs and perceptions of the university community relate to individual and institutional practices and the policies may further develop an institutional culture that values teaching and learning. To investigate this further, a wide-scale survey, such as the Teaching Culture Perception Survey (Kustra et al., 2014) might be employed and shifts in institutional culture might be explored, relationships between institutional culture

and approaches to quality assurance might be researched, and faculty and student perceptions of institutional culture may be compared with conceptions of quality.

### **Scope and Limitations**

This was not intended to be an impact study. It was a study to help develop a better understanding of the conceptions of quality that are held by senior administrators and the strategies that they use for implementing QA processes. Further, it was meant to explore the variety of ways in which QA is approached. This study was bounded within an Ontario context and formed a snapshot-in-time of how conceptions of quality and implementation strategies can be considered as elements of overall approaches to QA. Methods of site and participant selection may not necessarily be representative of a particular population. Recognizing this limitation, Cope (2004) advises that in phenomenographic research, it is important to specify the characteristics of the participants so that readers can consider for themselves whether the results here may generalize to the group about which they are interested. I make no assumptions, however, that the results from this study are generalizable beyond the participants included, to other provinces or countries or to other time periods; however, this study may provide useful and transferable information that could enable future research to trace conceptions of quality through time or across locations.

It is important to note also that there are limitations with the results of this study with respect to the accuracy of the participants' portrayal of their internal beliefs. Assumptions were made about participants' perceptions of quality based on what they said about indicators and elements of high quality programs. They may have been sharing their impressions of the framework's metrics, their institutional culture, external

reviewers' perceptions, or other beliefs. While efforts were taken to maximize the possibility of variability in perspectives, there were no efforts made to recruit a representative sample of participants. The focus was on discovering a broad range of conceptualizations and approaches, but it is important to note that even with this strategy, it is unlikely that all possible perspectives on QA have been reported here. Others may likely emerge as we continue to deepen our understanding of how QA processes are being experienced within universities.

Finally, I must acknowledge my own experiences as they have provided me a lens through which I understand QA. As an educational developer at an Ontario university, I gained practical working knowledge of the QAF and hands-on experience implementing resources to support departments in their QA efforts. This knowledge and experience gave me a comprehensive grasp of the phenomenon under investigation. While this has the potential of generating content-related credibility (Collier-Reed, Ingerman, & Berglund, 2009), it was important that I also consider ways in which I could "bracket" this understanding, set aside my own assumptions, and allow myself to remain open and focussed on the variety of ways that others conceptualize and experience the phenomenon (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000; Booth, 1992). Removing myself and my perspectives entirely was not possible, however, I was cautious to minimize the influence of my biases and assumptions during the interview process, and to maximize the potential for drawing out the participants' perspectives and experiences.

### **Conclusions**

This study sought to better understand how senior administrators at Ontario's universities conceptualized quality and what strategies they used to implement QA

processes. By investigating their conceptions and strategies through a phenomenographic methodology, it became evident that a range of approaches to QA existed. Rather than the two categories of retrospective QA and prospective or forward-looking QA (Biggs), what has emerged here is a more complex spectrum that ranges from a more retrospective approach that defends quality through to a present-focused approach that aims to portray how quality is meeting current goals through to a more forward-looking or prospective approach that seeks to continuously enhance quality through reflection. The Defending Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as exceptional, excellence, and distinction, with a focus on administrative accountability, and a decentralized, hands-off strategy where the importance seems to lie in defending the traditional notions of quality inputs and resources. The Demonstrating Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money, with a focus on accountability to students, and centralized engaged strategies to demonstrate of how the program meets its current priorities and intended outcomes. The Enhancing Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as transformation, with a focus on reflection and student learning experience, using centralized engaged strategies to find new ways of engaging students and improving learning and teaching. University administrators can reflect upon their own approaches to QA, giving thought to both their conceptions of quality and their implementation strategies, and consider how their QA approaches relate to the shared beliefs, values, and practices within the broader institution.

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## Appendix A

### Development of the Interview Guide

I drafted questions with input from my doctoral advisory committee, remembering that I would need to remain open to and focused on alternative ways to conceptualize quality and additional influences that may have helped to shape the quality culture at institutions. To allow for this flexibility, I felt it was necessary to set an informal and conversational tone for each interview. Thus, I started by expressing my appreciation for the participant's time to engage in conversation with me about the culture of quality assurance within his or her institution. I also explained that my guiding questions were flexible enough to allow for tangents and re-ordering of questions depending on the path that the conversation took.

In phenomenography, depth and variation is important, so interviewers often seek to further clarify what participants have said and ask them to explain their meaning further (Åkerlind, 2005; Bowden, 2000). I therefore had created a list of follow-up questions that I could use during the interviews. Before the interview began, I let my participants know that I would likely ask short follow-up questions to make sure I was understanding what I was hearing (e.g., by asking "So, are you saying that...?"), to get more information (e.g., "Please tell me more about that"), to clarify perspective (e.g., "is that your own perspective, your take on the university's perspective, or the official university stance?"), or to learn more about what you think about something (e.g., "Why do you think that is...?"). These types of follow-up questions can help participants to reflect more on what they expressed, to explain their understanding more deeply, and to reveal their way of understanding the phenomenon (Bowden, 2000). Further, the follow-up questions allowed for a more conversational interview, enabling exploration of tangents and questioning that probed for elaboration and clarification. I was prepared to allow the comments and responses from the participants to guide interview dialogue and order of questions. As such, my interviews each followed what Marton (1986) described as 'somewhat different courses' (p. 42). Before beginning the interview, I reminded participants of the purpose of the study and then asked them whether they had anything they would like to mention before I began audio-recording. I used the following questions to guide each interview.

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Guide**

#### **Experience, role, and context:**

- What is your role at the university?
- Tell me how you have been involved in the quality assurance processes at your institution.
- What discussions and decisions guided the development of the initial IQAP?

#### **Conceptions of quality:**

- In what ways is quality conceptualized at your institution?
- What does 'quality' mean with respect to education (to you/your institution)?
- Why is quality assurance necessary? Why is it important?
- What are some of the elements that make up a high quality educational program or a high quality learning experience?

#### **Implementing quality assurance:**

- What supports and resources are available to support programs as they engage with the quality assurance program review process?
- What has surprised you the most about the new quality assurance processes?
- Where do you hope to see quality assurance 5 years from now?

#### **Perceptions of response/reception/cultural values:**

- How have the new processes been received by deans, chairs, and faculty members?
- Is there anything else you think I should know to help me better understand the quality assurance culture at your institution?

#### **Other questions:**

- What do you see as the most positive outcomes that the IQAP has had so far?
- What are some of the biggest drawbacks that you've faced with the IQAP?
- Are there other issues or questions that the IQAP has raised at your university?

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

The overarching purpose of this doctoral study was to explore the conceptions of quality and the approaches to quality assurance, which I accomplished through both primary and secondary research. The secondary literature reviews formed the development of Chapters 2 and 3. In Chapter 2, I described a model that represented my understanding of the six major influences that led to increased demands for a revised quality assurance process in Ontario. As I have continued to study and work with quality assurance processes, I have recognized that political and economic influences are the current drivers for quality assurance and for the pressure to document student learning outcomes. Of course, international influences were important in designing the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) to enable and assert the international equivalency or transferability of Ontario degree credentials. The social, technological, and media influences seem to be, at least from my personal experience, less of a driving force at this time.

As Chapter 3 details, the driving forces that are changing our higher education landscape in Ontario are mainly political and economic. The Government of Ontario, in connection with the current economic challenges, has a great influence on the decisions and directions taken with Ontario's universities. Between the Productivity and Innovation Funds, the Differentiation Framework, the requirement of Strategic Mandate Agreements, and, most recently, the new requirements for new program approvals, the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities is perhaps the strongest influence on university functions in Ontario. As the function and purpose of a university is called into question, it is important to consider what universities strive to achieve when they state that they provide a quality education.

Two overarching research questions were developed to explore the conceptions of quality and the approaches to quality assurance. Chapter 4 focused on answering the first question: How do Ontario's QA policies and documents attend to the meaning of quality? Analysis of the QAF suggested that the authors have implied a fitness for purpose definition of quality, though they do not propose a clear definition for quality in the context of the QAF. The rationale and the structure of the framework suggested the importance of articulating a program's goals and intended learning outcomes in relation to both the institution's mission and the province-wide degree level expectations. The early sections of the QAF were all supportive of this concept, asking for the articulation of how an academic program provides its curriculum and uses assessments to ensure that students are able to meet the expectations. The document however goes on to suggest the inclusion of quality indicators and metrics that instead reflect a definition of quality as exceptional. This misalignment within the document is a problem that has been perpetuated and amplified by each of the university's IQAPs. Misalignment of priorities and metrics leads to confusion and ultimately degrades student learning (Biggs, 2001). To encourage institutional cultures that value quality teaching and learning, a critical review and revision of QAF and IQAP structure is prudent.

Chapter 5 addressed the second overarching research question: How do university administrators approach quality assurance processes? Using in-depth interviews and a phenomenographic approach, this study sought to better understand how senior administrators at Ontario's universities conceptualized quality and what strategies they used to implement quality assurance processes. Results suggested three main approaches. The Defending Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as

exceptional, excellence, and distinction, with a focus on administrative accountability, and a decentralized, hands-off strategy where the importance seems to lie in defending the traditional notions of quality inputs and resources. The Demonstrating Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money, with a focus on accountability to students and centralized engaged strategies to demonstrate how the program meets its current priorities and intended outcomes. The Enhancing Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as transformation, with a focus on reflection and student learning experience, using centralized engaged strategies to find new ways of improving both student learning and also teaching.

Awareness of their own conceptions, strategies, and approaches to QA may help university administrators to skillfully navigate educational policy and institutional culture in their efforts to advance change. To foster a reflective institution, as conceptualized by Biggs (2001), educational leaders may need to modify existing policies, encourage new collaborative practices that demonstrate the value that the institution places on quality teaching and learning, and purposefully remove factors that are detrimental to teaching and learning.

### **Implications for Policy and Practice**

Education is inherently shaped and influenced by external societal forces, ideological perspectives, and current political, economic, and social concerns. Through both primary and secondary research, quality assurance policies and practices were considered in relation to their origins, to prevailing worldviews, and to current external influences. The two empirical studies, together, have begun to unmask the relationships between quality assurance policy and the wider economic, social, and political forces that



define it by inquiring into the conceptions of quality, underlying different strategies and approaches to quality assurance.

Policies are not simply documents; they ultimately are also processes and practices that take place every day on the microlevel (Ball, 1993). We cannot think of policy and process separately; it is imperative to “bring together structural, macro-level analysis of education systems and education policies and micro-level investigation, especially that which takes account of people's perception and experiences” (Ozga, 1990, p. 359). I am troubled by the more traditional views of policy as text. Instead, like other interpretive policy researchers (Fischer 2003; Lejano, 2006; Yanow, 2000,), I am much more apt to believe that to research and analyze policy and to come to a deeper understanding of policy, we must consider policy as both theory and practice within a particular sociopolitical context. Analyzing the policy document in isolation may provide critical insight into theory development, but it minimizes the important element of practice.

Policies as text, according to Ball (1993), are representations that are encoded and decoded in complex ways. Policy in this sense is seen as a textual intervention into practice, but the meaning of the text is contestable, and one must recognize that the texts themselves are not necessarily clear or complete. Instead they are often the product of compromise and negotiation which then go through a process of interpretation when picked up by their readers. Policy as discourse, as Ball stated, stresses the importance of practices that relate to the policy, including what is said and thought about it, but also about who can speak, when, where, and with authority about the policy. Discourse in Ball's view is a system of practices and a set of values and ethics in which we take up positions constructed for us within policies. Policies, thus, are not simply documents or

things; they are the context, processes, dialogue, and outcomes. To close the gap between the analysis of policy text and its field of application, consideration must be given to the context and complexity of real policy situations. As such, my doctoral research aimed to consider the quality assurance policies both in their formal textual documents and in the perceptions and experiences of senior administrators.

It is crucial for university administrators to understand the policy process, including the origins of policy, and its drivers, conceptual underpinnings, and implementation strategies. Careful reflection and integrative thinking (Martin, 2007) about issues in leadership, policy, and organizational change (Burrell & Morgan, 1979) may facilitate the development of sound policies (Ball, 1993; Cooper, Levin, & Campbell, 2009), implementation of transformative educational leadership practices (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Stewart, 2006), and, ultimately, in the context of quality assurance, the shift of institutional culture to emphasize the value of teaching and learning.

Considerable literature and empirical research dealing with the topics of institutional culture and enhancement of quality teaching exist internationally (Aitken & Sorcinelli, 1994; Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2011; Gosling, 2013; Harvey & Stensaker, 2008; Hodge, Nadler, Shore, & Taylor, 2011; Kalliainen, 2013; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Van Hout, 2014; Prosser, 2013), and more recently within Canada (PIF Quality Teaching Culture Project Kustra et al., in press). Institutional culture provides a lens through which its members assign value to the various events and efforts of their institution (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Brennan & Shah, 2000; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Lanares, 2008; Lindquist, 1978). A culture that values teaching would involve a

shared campus commitment to high quality teaching, to meaningfully assessing teaching (Paulsen & Felman, 1995), and to identifying ways of continuously enhancing the learning experience of students through its teaching.

It is thought that an institutional culture focused on improving teaching quality can improve student learning (Cox et al., 2011). While it may be tempting to assess the impact of culture on its individual members, it is essential to develop an appreciation of the dynamics and relationship between individuals and institutional beliefs, values, and practices (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Denison, 1996). Understanding and skillfully navigating institutional culture from an educational leadership perspective would be important in order to advance change initiatives (Kezar & Eckel, 2002), including the implementation of quality assurance processes. To foster a reflective institution, as conceptualized by Biggs (2001), educational leaders can modify existing policies and encourage new practices that demonstrate the value that the institution places on quality teaching and learning. Such leaders would engage in critical reflection, identify opportunities and impediments, and then strive to remove factors within the institutional culture that are deleterious to learning or to high quality teaching. As Biggs suggested, these harmful factors most often result from confused, distorted, or misaligned priorities.

The shifts we have seen in higher education teaching, away from focusing on the teachers themselves towards focusing on the process of teaching are mimicked in educational leadership field. Leadership theory and practices in higher education has been changing the focus from “‘the leader’ as control agent, to ‘leading’ which opens up space for creative, shared and collaborative approaches to the field” (Davis & Jones, 2014, p. 367). We see trends now towards what Ramsden (1998) called for almost two

decades ago, that “leadership in universities should be everyone from the Vice Chancellor to the casual car parking attendant” (p. 4). These shared, distributed, and relational approaches to university leadership have emerged in recent years (Bolden, 2011; Davis, 2014; Gronn, 2009; Jones, Harvey, & Lefoe, 2014). This shift in leadership practice requires

a change in mindset even greater than that required when moving from the “industrial era,” with its emphasis on machines with individual managers controlling employees, or even from the “information age,” with its emphasis on networks and leaders controlling information flows. Instead, requisite approaches to leadership for the current times are resting on a new metaphor—that of ecologies—where everything is interconnected and leading involves stewardship and the privileging of relationships. (Davis & Jones, 2014, p. 368)

University leaders must acknowledge the importance of relationships. They need to take time to deeply understand the change drivers shaping their environment as well as the dynamic relationships that exist between individual members and the overall institutional culture. An expanded leadership mindset (Hempsall, 2014) may help leaders develop what Davis (2014) calls “leadingful leadership literacies” (p. 371), or the awareness of how to develop meaningful relationships that can harness the energies of all who work within universities, including all the faculty and staff who contribute to developing and maintaining high quality academic programs for their students.

While collegial or shared models of governance undoubtedly add complexity to university systems, it is the shared, distributed, and relational leadership approaches that hold promise for QA leaders to identify new forms of collaborative leadership

relationships between faculty and staff and help to increase the focus on enhancing the teaching and learning practices within their institutions.

Conceptions of quality and the judgements on the effectiveness of quality assurance management are embedded in the culture of an institution and its organisational values (Bergquist & Pawlak, 2008; Harvey & Green, 1993; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kleijnen et al., 2014). The development of a campus culture that values the institution's function in student learning and quality teaching requires holistic consideration of the beliefs and perceptions held by members of the institution, a clear articulation of the institution's conceptions of quality, and a critical analysis of how these conceptions align with individual and institutional practices and policies (Houston, 2008; Kleijnen, Dolmans, Willems, & Van Hout, 2013; Kleijnen et al., 2014; Lanarès, 2008; Newton, 2000).

The results from this study have implications for both policy and leadership practice within Ontario and possibly beyond. The document analysis in chapter 4 revealed a need to carefully review and modify the existing QAF slightly. Quality Council should confirm and make explicit their meaning of quality, and encourage universities to make explicit their institutional conceptions of quality. The QAF's list of quality indicators should be revised to reflect more adequately the conceptions of quality and purpose of quality assurance. Finally, it is recommended that to help enable quality assurance in Ontario universities to be about quality enhancement, Quality Council should not only consider emphasizing the achievement of learning outcomes in a fitness for purpose conception of quality, but also prioritizing the importance of teaching and

learning as a transformative and value-added process. Presage indicators should be de-emphasized, while process and learning outcome indicators should be emphasized.

University leaders responsible for setting up systems within universities have an impact on how quality assurance is approached. The phenomenographic research revealed that university leaders take various approaches to quality assurance. It is recommended that QA leaders pause and reflect upon their own conceptions of quality in relation to how they have set up QA support systems within their institutions. It would be important for these leaders to consider their own conceptions of quality in relation to those of the broader university membership and in relation to the stated mission, vision, and priorities of the university. University leaders might consider whether their current approaches to QA are reflective of how they would like to be approaching QA and what directions they may wish to move in the coming years of their tenure in their QA leadership position.

### **Implications for Theory**

The document analysis in chapter 4 provides a practical example of how Biggs's (2001) theory on developing a reflective institution can be used to assess alignment between institutional belief about quality, what he calls the quality model, and the practices and systems in place that aim to achieve quality enhancement. It also provides a useful reminder to consider other policies and practices that exist to prevent quality enhancement. While he intended his model to be used at the institutional level, this research has demonstrated how his model could be applied at a sector-wide level using publicly-available documents. This research thus provides confirmation that the existing

model is applicable and useful to assessing quality assurance systems both at an institutional level (e.g., IQAP analysis) and at a sector-wide level (e.g., QAF analysis).

The phenomenographic findings provided evidence that suggests a change to Biggs's (2001) conceptual model of prospective and retrospective quality assurance. What has emerged from this research is a more complex spectrum that ranges from a more retrospective QA approach that defends quality through to a present-focused approach that aims to portray how quality is meeting current goals through to a more forward-looking or prospective QA approach that seeks to continuously enhance quality through reflection. The proposed Defending Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as exceptional, excellence, and distinction, with a focus on administrative accountability, and a decentralized, hands-off strategy where the importance seems to lie in defending the traditional notions of quality inputs and resources. The Demonstrating Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as fitness for purpose and value for money, with a focus on accountability to students, and centralized engaged strategies to demonstrate how the program meets its current priorities and intended outcomes. The Enhancing Quality approach is characterized by conceptions of quality as transformation, with a focus on reflection and student learning experience, using centralized engaged strategies to find new ways of engaging students and improving learning and teaching. The revision to this model is supported by the data in this study, but future research would need to confirm whether this revised model will hold when other participants are included and whether it will expand to other stakeholder groups involved in assuring university quality.

### **Future Research and Next Steps**

Future research should work towards validating the generalizability of the revised approaches to QA model. Once it is confirmed with other administrative participants, future research might investigate how it applies to other stakeholder groups, including departmental chairs and faculty members who are involved in program review and quality assurance. The development an instrument might then be useful to help those involved in QA to consider their own conceptions of quality, strategies in assuring quality, and approaches to quality assurance.

My own interests lie in identifying ways to foster a campus culture that values the enhancing quality approach. Research that investigates the connection between changes in institutional culture and changes to policies and practices would be of great interest. A wide-scale survey, such as the Teaching Culture Perception Survey (Goff et al., 2014; Kustra et al., 2014) might be employed to document shifts in institutional culture, to identify relationships between institutional culture and approaches to quality assurance, or to connect faculty and student perceptions of institutional culture with conceptions of quality or approaches to quality assurance. Case studies on particular universities that have been successful in shifting their campus culture and prioritizing the perceived value of teaching and learning would be not only of interest, but would be practically useful to other institutions who wish to make such changes.

For me, it is this practical application of new or potential research that excites me the most. Throughout my tenure as a doctoral student and candidate, I have been fortunate to also be employed at McMaster University where I gained practical experience in implementing resources and supports for programs undergoing a review or



in new program development. My practical experiences informed my research agenda and questions, and the research results and ideas had immediate benefit to my current everyday practices. This has allowed me to implement into practice the new ideas that emerged from my research without the delay of the dissemination process. My next research project involves an investigation of faculty conceptions of quality and approaches to quality assurance, which I hope to later explore and connect with perceptions of teaching culture.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Ultimately the research I conducted during my time as a doctoral student gave me pause and encouraged me to think carefully about my own conceptions of quality and strategies for quality assurance. The words of Stephan Ball (1993) resonated with me:

Now typically in a paper which begins like this one I would now offer my own definitive version of the meaning of policy and with a few rhetorical flourishes and a bit of fancy theoretical footwork I would solve all the problems that I have pointed up. But I cannot do that. Or at least I cannot do that very simply. (p. 11)

Just like Ball says of policy, I hold my own theoretical uncertainties about the meaning of quality. I am conflicted between the concepts of quality as fitness for purpose and as transformation. So, I offer this carefully blended statement. I view a learning experience as high in quality when its goal, process, and outcome add value through the power of transformation, student engagement, and reflection. Considering this and the strategies that I adopt in my own practice, I find myself firmly planted, at this point in time, within the intersection between the Documenting Quality and Enhancing Quality approaches.

Ultimately, quality is not an easy concept to define, but in the context of quality assurance, it is essential that its meaning be given very thoughtful consideration and integration into policy, practice, and the institutional culture. Twenty years from now, I am hopeful that, at least in Ontario universities, the need to consider the various meanings of quality will be recognized. More importantly though, I am hopeful that Defending Quality approaches will be replaced with Demonstrating and Enhancing Quality approaches to university education. It is these approaches that I believe will provide the greatest opportunity to emphasize continuous improvement of both the process of teaching and the learning outcomes, to encourage reflection, and to involve and engage students in their education.

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