Theme 4:

Journeys within the Credentials Framework: One organization's tales of quality assurance within a jurisdictional qualifications framework

ABSTRACT

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

PROPOSAL

This paper and session describe the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service's (OCQAS) experience since it began operations in 2005. They outline some of the key challenges that the OCQAS has faced working within the boundaries of a government-established qualifications framework and by the related legislation.

In Canada, provinces are responsible for the structure, development and implementation of education is a provincial responsibility: there is no federal, centralized body that oversees education. As a result the provinces and territories have adopted various approaches to quality assurance processes, with no over-arching guiding body at the national level.

Ontario's current system came to be as a result of a major shift in thinking. In 2002, after 35 years of proven success, Ontario's colleges were legislated much greater autonomy. The legislation would allow the colleges to demonstrate that they are successfully achieving their missions. Another key change that came along with this devolution of autonomy was a move to outcomes-based credentialing. Driving this change was the Credentials Framework, a document that uses outcomes to describe the qualifications typically offered by Ontario's public colleges. In return for greater autonomy, the college system was required through legislation to become self-regulating and to provide its own quality assurance, which took the shape of the Credentials Validation Service (CVS). CVS' major role is to validate new and revised college program outcomes against the Credentials Framework. In this validation, CVS must ensure that outcomes are written at the appropriate level, and that there is province-wide consistency in terms of programming and titling.

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

The overall landscape of postsecondary quality assurance in Ontario is somewhat disjointed. Currently legislation requires college certificates and diplomas to be validated by CVS; PQAPA assures ongoing institutional-level compliance. The quality of university credentials is assessed internally and assured by a new agency, the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance. In addition to the universities, other institutions – including a number of colleges – may seek ministerial consent to grant degrees. These degree proposals are assessed by a third organization, the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB), which, unlike OCQAS and the Quality Council, is an arms-length government body. PEQAB is co-ordinated by a secretariat which is housed within the government and assesses degree-level credentials against its own degree framework. In sum, in Ontario there is one quality assurance agency for the province's 19 publicly-assisted universities, one quality assurance agency for the 24 colleges of applied arts and technology, and one quality assessment body for college degree programs. These three agencies use three separate but similar frameworks. The Quality Council uses a series of Undergraduate and Graduate Degree Level Expectations; PEQAB uses its own Degree Level Standards; and OCQAS uses the Credentials Framework. These three documents are integrated, to some extent, in the Ministry-published Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF). However, the intent of the OQF is to describe the province's postsecondary education landscape, not to prescribe the requirements within it.

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

Another issue for consideration is the fact that the outcomes-based approach mandated for use by OCQAS as a base for all its operations is not altogether consistent with the inputs-based methodologies used elsewhere in Ontario's postsecondary education sector. This difference in approaches has led to an unusual paradox: the government that developed and mandated the outcomes-based credentials framework for colleges is sometimes hard-pressed in seeing OCQAS' approach as credible.

The session will provide a brief discussion of Ontario's postsecondary education landscape and will focus on the challenges that the OCQAS has faced and steps taken to overcome them. Time will be allotted at the end for discussion and questions from the session participants.

This session, involving didactic and visual information in a Prezi presentation, will be presented by André Diez de Aux, Quality Assurance Associate at OCQAS, and Joy Warkentin, Chair of the OCQAS Management Board.

A projector, screen and computer with Internet connection will be required.