

Quality Assurance Framework Consultation Summary

September 2013

INTRODUCTION

British Columbia (B.C.) has a world renowned post-secondary education system. To maintain it, government and institutions are committed to continuous quality improvement to ensure that stakeholders, including students and employers, benefit from the outcomes of a quality assurance framework and that our quality assurance practices are consistent with recognized best practices. The primary objectives of B.C.'s quality assurance framework are to:

- uphold rigorous provincial quality assurance standards that support institutional excellence,
- promote confidence in educational quality across the entire post-secondary system; and,
- protect students' investment in their own education.

In March 2013, the government released a quality assurance framework green paper for public review and comment. The proposed model was focused on continuous quality improvement principles and envisioned a cohesive, province-wide approach to quality assurance that recognizes institutional and sector diversity, provides greater student protection, streamlines multiple designation processes, and introduces proportionate external quality assurance oversight (see Appendix 1 in the green paper). The document was informed by a quality assurance expert working group, system discussions that began in the spring of 2012, previous government reports, and research relevant to quality assurance.

Government presented a vision for a quality assurance system that would be:

1. **more streamlined** for students and stakeholders to understand and for institutions and government to administer;
2. **more strategic** to enable a differentiated form and level of external quality assurance oversight reflecting demonstrated institutional internal strength in quality assessment practices; and
3. **more flexible** to foster and recognize innovation in the system.

During the spring of 2013, a substantial amount of positive and constructive feedback was received via multiple platforms, with system-wide discussions being the primary avenue.

Among the feedback received, two important elements stand out as having greatly influenced government's current approach to changes to the quality assurance framework:

Timeline.

Concerns were raised that government was moving too quickly to implement broad scale changes. Institutions felt strongly that more time and information was needed to ensure obligations of a new quality assurance framework could be met.

Scale and scope of change.

Participants questioned whether the proposed changes were proportionate to the issues government was trying to address. It was suggested that government focus changes in its areas of concern rather than full-scale change for the entire post-secondary education system.

In response to these elements, during the summer of 2013, government undertook a more collaborative and inclusive consultation process with the intention of collectively reflecting with the system on how to move forward with changes to the quality assurance framework. Government was thus committed to listening to the system with an open mind on any suggested improvements and approaches identified as areas of priority.

Discussions held focused on the best quality assurance outcomes for the province, immediate issues that need to be addressed, and what considerations are important moving forward. The following questions were used to facilitate the meetings:

1. What is quality assurance in post-secondary education and is there anything that needs to be fixed in the current quality assurance and designation processes?
2. Are there challenges on the horizon that concern you?
3. Are there ways that we can collectively address the issues just identified?
 - a. What can government do to help?
 - b. What can government not do to help?
4. What is the minimal approach to change?
5. What is the most comprehensive approach to change?

Discussions were held with:

- Public institutions
- Private degree-granting institutions
- Private career-training institutions
- Private language schools

SYSTEM FEEDBACK

The summary of feedback is organized by the questions used to facilitate the meetings.

Question 1: What is quality assurance in post-secondary education and is there anything that needs to be fixed in the current quality assurance and designation processes?

In response to this question, consultation participants often made reference to outcomes and processes. These themes are consistent with what was identified in earlier consultations with the system.

Effective outcomes for students.

Participants indicated that it was critical that quality requires a description of learning outcomes and institutional transparency in stating and reporting outcomes. Students should be able to match their expectations with the outcomes of an educational program and be prepared to achieve the outcomes. Another component of a quality assurance process should provide validation of educational quality and ensures the integrity of credentials. Students, employers, licensing bodies and other stakeholders have an interest in a system of quality assurance that upholds rigorous standards. This would assure domestic and international markets that the program meets educational standards and that the credential earned is meaningful.

Ensure student protection is provided regardless of the type of institution, the type of program or where the program is delivered.

Stakeholders agreed that ensuring institutional and program quality required that all students should receive the education promised in their institution's public documents, such as recruitment posters, websites and calendars. There was broad agreement that students should have access to free, easy-to-understand information for all post-secondary educational institutions to inform their decisions.

Effective quality assurance should be assessed within the context of institutional mission and educational purpose, be based on peer-review, and encourage continuous quality improvement.

Participants encouraged the Ministry to take a multi-dimensional understanding of *quality* as institutions and government must negotiate and balance multiple stakeholder perspectives on quality. Quality assurance should be outcomes-focused, data-driven, and transparent. Support for innovation and entrepreneurship to allow institutions to be creative in their pedagogic approaches, and responsive to student and community needs, was seen as a key component of a quality assurance process. Importantly, it was stressed that quality assurance needs to be a collaborative effort between institutions and government. Institutions should have a fair level of autonomy and have primary responsibility for quality assessment of programs. Government has the responsibility to respond to public desire for accountability and transparency of the broad post-secondary system.

Question 2: Are there challenges on the horizon that concern you? and Question 3: Are there ways that we can collectively address the issues just identified?

Responses for questions 2 and 3 have been arranged together to reflect the groups' conversations. Diverse student needs and expectations, the goal to maintain international competitiveness, and additional reporting requirements, were identified as the common challenges facing the system. The public sector also identified challenges around resource constraints. Approaches for addressing the challenges were also identified.

Diverse Student Needs.

The biggest challenge identified by participants was the increasing diversity of student needs and expectations.

- Aboriginal students are the fastest growing student population. To support post-secondary education achievement for this population, it was expressed that institutions need to ensure that there are appropriate support structures in place to help students succeed. In addition, Aboriginal-controlled institutes need a mechanism to help facilitate recognition and credit transfer. It was suggested that the Province should establish long-term funding for programs that support Aboriginal students and consider how the quality assurance framework interfaces with the Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework.
- An increase in the international student population was also viewed as a challenge because they require different types of support to succeed.
- In general, institutions must also be responsive to changing student expectations of when, where, and how education is delivered.

International Competitiveness.

Institutions stressed the need for a quality assurance system to maintain relevancy and consistent quality assurance processes that are recognized as best practices internationally. Institutions invest

a lot of resources to meet the Province's quality assurance obligations and there should be some consideration given to whether the quality assurance system serves the needs of institutions. For example, is there a need that is not being met that is driving some institutions to seek American regional accreditation? Participants encouraged government to look at other quality assurance systems, adopt the best practices, and become a leader in quality assurance. To increase B.C.'s competitiveness, some participants advocated adopting the term *accreditation* and rebranding the Education Quality Assurance designation. Accreditation should indicate quality assurance validation and authority for the institution to operate, and it would also provide recognition for lesser-known institutions in international markets where the term is widely understood.

Additional Reporting Requirements.

Participants raised the concern about additional reporting requirements should a new quality assurance framework be implemented. Current reporting obligations are viewed as onerous and burdensome, and not particularly useful to improving education outcomes. For the Private Career Training Institutions Agency (PCTIA) institutions, it was noted that there should be rigour in quality standards but it should not be unnecessarily burdensome. For public institutions, the reporting requirements are viewed as repetitive and redundant. It was suggested that PCTIA and the ministry consolidate or streamline reporting requirements by considering what is truly necessary for quality assessment and considering how the data collected can be used for multiple purposes. Institutions clearly stated there needs to be clear rationale for any new or additional reporting requirements and that they should add value to the quality of education.

Resource Constraints.

Public institutions stated that funding policies and limits are barriers to improving transfer, supporting students, and building institutional capacity including resources to collect data and conduct institutional research. Public institutions indicated that they face unnecessary constraints that make it difficult to increase their revenues independent of government funding.

Question 4: What is the minimal approach to change?

In identifying the approach to change, there was not one specific improvement for each challenge; rather, it was a collection of improvements that would help facilitate institutional response and action. Overall, participants encouraged government to maintain the momentum it has established and to continue making quality assurance a priority. Some participants raised the issue of a national approach to quality assurance. Government reiterated its willingness to continue working with the provinces and territories through the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada.

As part of the minimal approach to change, participants suggested that government begin to address the following points:

Adopt proportionate quality assurance oversight where good institutions undergo an institutional review rather than program reviews.

Institutions are committed to educational quality. For institutions that have demonstrated strong internal quality control and management, quality assurance oversight should focus on audits of the institution's quality assessment policies and practices.

Improve program review processes.

Revise reporting and program reviews to be more student outcomes focused, add a follow-up mechanism rather than focussing only on program approval, speed up the timeline for degree

approval, and orient review panels in widely-accepted peer review practices. Review processes should support institutions to be more innovative, entrepreneurial, and responsive to student and community needs.

Support educational quality improvement.

Adopt an iterative approach and support institutions towards quality improvement through best practices. Government can provide resources and a platform for institutions to exchange ideas on internal quality control and management and to learn from each other.

Greater transparency.

Standards and processes need to be clearly stated with explicit expectations, outcomes, and timelines. Private career-training institutions expressed a desire for greater accountability in the management of the Student Training Completion Fund, more transparency on why PCTIA is requesting information, and greater consideration of current and new regulatory obligations.

Increase cooperation between organizations and align quality assurance processes when possible.

There needs to be clear roles and responsibilities for various bodies (e.g., government, crowns, and regulatory bodies) engaged in quality assurance to avoid duplication and inconsistent standards.

Question 5: What is the most comprehensive approach to change?

In general, full-scale change was viewed as a single quality assurance framework that recognizes the uniqueness of each sector with a single quality assurance body responsible for quality assurance across the province. The frequency and intensity of quality reviews would be proportionate to the strength of the institution's internal program quality control and management.

Summary

- Quality assurance and student protection remain a priority for government and institutions.
- Government is committed to working with the system to strengthen the quality assurance for the post-secondary education system.
- Areas clearly identified for improvement during the consultations will inform the next steps of the process.
- Government has clearly heard that a more collaborative approach, together with the post-secondary system, is the way to proceed.

NEXT STEPS

In keeping with government's commitment to a more collaborative and inclusive approach, government will continue working with the sectors to identify ongoing problems and solutions to enhance the quality of their respective sectors. Part of this process will be determining roles and responsibilities of the institutions, sectors, and government, in ensuring students receive the education promised by the institution. Government and the system will determine measurable next steps and timelines.

Government also has commitments relating to quality assurance that were made through the Aboriginal Post-Secondary Education and Training Policy Framework and the International Education Strategy. In addition, the Province has obligations for the International Student Program once the federal government regulations come into effect in spring 2014. Government will work to fulfil these commitments and obligations through regulatory and/or policy changes.