Key Note Talk for DQAB's QAPA Forum
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Thanks for your introduction and for giving me the opportunity to share a few thoughts with you on the current state of play in the quality assurance world. I confess that it is somewhat daunting to be offering these perceptions with people like Donna Woolcott, Doug Owram, Art Quinney, John Stubbs and many other seasoned QA practitioners in the room. All of them are perfectly capable of telling you that I'm delivering fake news.

I've been advised that, because quite a few of the participants here are new to the quality assurance file, I should try to pitch my remarks to you as well as to the QA veterans present. I'll try to navigate between both groups. What are my sources? My own experiences as a panellist doing QA reviews and doing cross-jurisdictional surveys of Canadian and international QA developments; the websites and recent annual reports of Canadian agencies from east to west; and some familiarity with the QA literature. What are the topics on which I'll touch? 1) The fact that formal QA in academic circles has migrated in from the corporate world; 2) the most conspicuous features of QA as it has evolved; 3) the sharpening of a focus on students as the principal stakeholders and beneficiaries of QA and the concomitant emphasis on teaching and learning and learning outcomes assessment; 4) the recent reviews of Canadian QA agencies to determine whether they are effective, efficient and adding value; 5) efforts to alleviate the regulatory burden QA agencies impose on institutions in their bailiwicks; 6) questions about the degree of transparency that ought to prevail about QA assessments; and 7) the adoption of QA as a branding device.

Let's start with the proposition that academia didn't invent QA. It is transplanted from industry, especially from the realization in North America after WWII that Japanese organizational practices had been productive and had given the Japanese a competitive edge. The Total Quality Management and ISO movements are manifestations of that interest in corporate circles. I sometimes point out that the acronym ISO, created in 1947, stands for International Organization for Standardization. In academic circles we don't like the term "standardization" much, even though all QA systems invariably rely on the public enunciation of standards that organizations and programs are expected to meet if not exceed. Less thoughtful members of Boards of Governors at colleges and universities are sometimes baffled by the idea that you can uphold standards in the name of quality without espousing or enforcing standardization.

I'll delineate a handful of features of the QA landscape in post-secondary education, as they have developed over the last several decades. They are: 1) the centrality and sanctity of peer review, which can be traced back, I maintain, to the 39th clause of the Magna Carta (1215) and its notion that one should be judged by a jury of one's peers; 2) the effort to achieve a delicate balance between the public's thirst for accountability on the part of institutions that offer degrees and, conversely, government's need and the need of QA agencies to respect the Board-governed autonomy of those same institutions; 3) the reciprocity of internal and external QA, the former being the full suite of policies, procedures and practices that fit the culture of an institution and have been developed and approved in-house, and the latter, third-party assessments that purport to provide impartial arm's-length evaluations of the extent to which institutions and their programs conform to published standards; 4) the

flexibility and adaptability of QA, internally and externally, when faced with new educational trends, preoccupations and fads and new modes of delivery; 5) an acknowledgement that QA agencies have traditionally emphasized inputs rather than outputs, outcomes or impacts and that attempts to induce a swing of the pendulum remain desirable.

When we look at the QA landscape now in an effort to discern some trends of international and national significance, the first is intensification of the idea that QA is about the protection of students' interests. Forms of intensification of the belief that QA should be and should be seen to be a student-centred appear in various guises. I'll begin with the reference to the phrase "students at the heart of the system." This is the title both of a wide-ranging report authored by Lord Brown in Britain on tertiary education there and of a White Paper subsequently issued by the government in 2011. Almost all QA bodies worldwide now highlight this idea in their statements of principles or their accounts of why they do what they do. Consider too the intensification of calls for student participation in review processes. Whether to involve students as members of Councils or Boards or as consultants on new programs or in the review of existing programs is a fraught topic that has animated debate among legislators and among QA agencies themselves. Ontario's Quality Council publishes a *Guide* to its QA framework in which it supplies some pointers on the engagement of students, even though its membership includes no students. It's interesting that DQAB has discontinued the practice of trying to find a student to belong to its Board and that CAQC has never instituted that practice. The impracticality of finding students to help populate QA Boards and Councils is often cited as a reason to exclude them, though that rationale

sometimes plays second fiddle to the idea that students are simply not competent to contribute to genuine "peer review".

There have also been calls for QA agencies to create home pages with sections addressed specifically to students. A good example of a practice that others emulate or are being encouraged by people like me to emulate is a section reserved "For Students" on the website of Australia's *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency*. A more modest example appears on SHEQAB's web page. Another emerging trend, germane to QA's sharper focus on students, is the tendency to articulate and map, in sometimes excruciating detail, learning outcomes at the institutional, program and course levels, and, just as important, articulation of the ways in which students will demonstrate that they have achieved the obligatory outcomes. National and regional conferences have adopted Learning Outcomes and Assessment as the organizing principle for large and very well received gatherings.

Step back from the growing focus on students in the processes, principles and practices of QA, and the broad view reveals that "teaching and learning" is now more than ever at the core of QA. That emphasis is a catalyst for the shift from QA's concentration on inputs to its focus on outcomes. Awhole cadre of people who are specialists in this area (often with advanced degrees from faculties of education or management) have more and more been pressed into service in both the intramural and the extramural QA domains. In Alberta, one of the new members of the CAQC, which regards itself as an "expert panel," is the former Vice-Provost of Teaching and Learning at the University of Calgary, and she joins at least two other members of that 11-person body with expertise in teaching and learning within

their disciplines. In Ontario, PEQAB, which is not an expert panel and has few members with academic backgrounds, said in 2011 it wanted to recruit more people conversant with contemporary thinking about teaching and learning. Not long ago, before the attention lavished on learning outcomes and their assessment, I would wager that only a small fraction of those involved in QA knew much about curriculum development, rubrics, e-portfolios, badges, competency-based education and their uses and abuses. But the thinking and vocabulary have changed, sometime subtly. I don't know whether anyone in Canada has pursued an advanced credential specifically devoted to quality assurance, but these credentials are now available in the international sphere. The University of Melbourne, for example, offers a one-year online graduate certificate in post-secondary quality assurance. It goes for just under AUD $15K.

This is the place to make a crude but crucial distinction: the proper province for the assessment of effective and productive teaching and learning is QA; the proper province of effective and productive research and scholarship, on the other hand, is found in the data exchanged by the U15 groups of research universities, in Ron Freedman's Research InfoSource, and in the various league tables that rate research inputs and outcomes using criteria that do not put students at the heart of the educational enterprise.

Another feature of the Canadian and global QA landscape worth noting here comes under the heading "*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*", a Latin phrase (from one of Juvenal's satires) that asks "who will watch the watchers?" How are QA agencies, which are in the business of evaluation themselves, evaluated? Who does it? What criteria are used? What outcomes

flow from the process? In the US, the six regional accrediting agencies and other QA bodies

there come under the oversight of the federal Department of Education, which just this year

withdrew its recognition of a body previously authorized to apply QA to for-profit providers.

Since 2010, when the Ontario College QA Service was externally reviewed, there have been

reviews of DQAB, of MPHEC's QA functions in Atlantic Canada, of PEQAB in Ontario,

and of the CAQC in Alberta. A review of the COU's Quality Council is imminent.

Writing just last week in *University World News*, the deputy director of the Lithuanian

Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education asserted that it is becoming increasingly

difficult to demonstrate the long- term impact of external quality assurance agencies. One of

the imperatives of the wave of reviews of QA agencies and boards in Canada is to

demonstrate their value—as perceived either by the entity itself or by the government or, in

the case of self-regulating agencies, the cluster of institutions to which they are answerable.

Increasingly, QA agencies are being asked to justify their existence.

Since there is no time here to delve into these reviews in any detail, I will observe, as a

person who was directly involved in three of them, how the processes underwriting them,

have been radically dissimilar. Consider two points related to the reviews of PEQAB and the

CAQC, the most recent evaluations. In Ontario, the Board of PEQAB launched the review,

appointed a 5-person panel chaired by Lee Harvey, a QA guru from the UK, authorized a

self-study written by the secretariat, and relied on criteria for cyclical external reviews of

quality assurance bodies drawn from the European Higher Education Area. In Alberta, the

review of CAQC was stimulated by a new government's desire to review the effectiveness

and efficiency of all agencies—known as the Agencies, Boards and Commissions review. The government controlled the whole process: it did not commission a self-assessment from the CAQC itself; it issued an RFP inviting certain people to apply for the job of undertaking the review; it specified the key questions that were to be entertained and heavily influenced the list of people to be interviewed and the manner in which they ought to be interviewed. The CAQC was not held to standards established by an external body; instead it was measured against standards for such reviews common to all agencies, boards and commissions in Alberta. Among the considerations defined by the *Alberta Public Agencies Governance Act* and of necessity, therefore, embedded in the review were "whether, and the extent to which, the public agency's mandate continues to be relevant to the goals, priorities and policies of the Government of Alberta" and "whether the functions performed by the public agency are best performed by the public agency, by another public agency, or by a department [of government.] "

A telling difference, given the commitment of most QA agencies to accountability and transparency, is that virtually everything from the review of PEQAB has entered the public domain and is published on that Board's website. The terms of reference for the impending review of the self-regulating Quality Council in Ontario also indicate that the steering committee's recommendations and their final disposition" will be made public." By contrast—and Art Quinney may well say more about this in the panel coming up next-- virtually nothing about the review of CAQC has been or is expected to be made public. In this respect, the Report on CAQC written for the government of Alberta resembles the Report on MPHEC written for the Council of Ministers of Education and Training in the

Atlantic provinces: in both cases, a cone of silence has descended over the analysis, findings, and recommendations. That I wrote both reports, with my co-author Sam Scully, Canada's coast-to-coast Provost, is presumably mere coincidence, not a matter to take personally,

Another trend in the QA world is a growing sense that the regulatory burden, as it is often called in the literature, is too onerous, especially for smaller, impecunious colleges or universities. Trust that an institution's internal QA policies, once vetted, will continue to pass muster, both conceptually and in practice, appears to be gaining ground. So there is greater emphasis on the mutually reinforcing reciprocity between internal and external forms of QA. Interest is spreading in the adoption of a cyclical audit system as a bridge between externally mandated QA and internally mandated QA. I won't say too much more about this since the topic is the *raison d'etre* of this forum. As a keen fan of audit systems, I will state that they are uncommonly helpful in narrowing the gap between internal and external QA and in balancing the twin principles of autonomy and accountability.

From my perspective the availability of audits as a "lighter touch" QA tool argues for the inclusion of universities in provincial QA arrangements. Concerted efforts to level the playing field between larger and smaller institutions and between predominately research universities and predominately teaching institutions are evident. The Ontario Universities Quality Council, through its Audit Committee, oversees audits for Nipissing and Sudbury as well as Western and UofT. The recent Annual Report of PEQAB in Ontario speaks to the possibility of identifying "mature" institutions that might undergo less intense scrutiny than others with the introduction of an audit system there. As Chair of the Saskatchewan Higher

Education Quality Assurance Board, I have been advocating since its inception that the two universities in the system there should not be excluded or exempted from the jurisdiction of the Board, but should be subject to it if only for the purposes of undergoing audits that would vouch for the strength of the intramural processes and practices used in them. If the Saskatchewan government's anticipated review of the Degree Authorization Act occurs in the next year, the question of whether the universities are in or out of the tent will undoubtedly arise.

Resorting to desk reviews rather than site visits and serious attempts to harmonize accreditation review processes with QA processes, especially in the preparation of documentation, are other markers of a tendency to lighten the regulatory burden QA imposes on institutions. I'd venture the guess that QA agencies in Canada more and more regard themselves as facilitators and less and less as gate-keepers. So they are open to institutional arguments that they need to lighten the touch.

I want to move on to talk about transparency. For QA agencies one dimension of this topic goes to the publication of results from the peer review processes. Increasingly, there are calls for institutions and QA agencies to be more forthcoming about the implementation of and the outcomes of their QA processes. The self-regulating COU QC requires publication of the reports from external assessors and the action items precipitated by those reports. These are called *Final Assessment Reports and Implementation Plans*, and instructions about how to prepare these documents according to leading practices are found in the *Guide* to the Quality Assurance Framework on that Council's website. Sometimes Executive Summaries suffice.

PEQAB does not currently require that that public postings of QA review reports occur and as a result was found by the external panel that evaluated it this year to be non-compliant with a significant ESG criterion employed in Europe. Publication of such documents is not now the norm in Canada, though there is pressure to make it happen and not to fall back on the idea that Freedom of Information requests provide a viable alternative.

A propensity to advertise success with an external QA process is afforded institutions in various parts of Canada by the use of a QA seal. To my knowledge, the first province to engage in QA branding was B.C., where the EQA designation and the use of an approved trademark are elements of the QA regime. Look up City University, which is headquartered in Seattle, but has campuses on Vancouver, Victoria, Edmonton and Calgary, and you will see the EQA seal prominently displayed, even when the programming is offered in Alberta! Look up Quest University, however, and it is not. Look up SFU and the EQA seal appears alongside the NCAA logo and the logo reflecting its recent designation as a member of AshokuU. One has to dig deeper to find out about SFU's accreditation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities in the U.S. In Saskatchewan, where the adoption of a QA seal was influenced very much by the B.C. model, the display of the seal is required after the Minister has consented to an institution's degree aspirations. B.C. realized that students, especially international students, want to be assured about the quality of the institutions and programs to which they are considering applying. Alberta and the Atlantic provinces have not yet adopted the use of a seal, but have been urged in recent external reviews to consider the possibility. QA branding may be particularly attractive for smaller less research- intensive institutions that don't make it into the top echelons of the league

tables, standing in which is frequently used to brand research institutions. I haven't seen anything from UofT bragging about its recent success in shepherding any of its new programs through the COU's Quality Council, but it is quick to proclaim in its news releases that it is the highest-ranked Canadian university in no fewer than five of the most prestigious international research rankings.

The Green Paper issued in B.C. in 2013 contemplated an alternative or a supplement to the imprimatur conferred by the EQA seal: namely, ratings of institutions within five categories on a sliding QA maturity scale. Such an idea is compatible with the introduction in Australia of the term "*Threshold* Standards" to signal that meeting QA criteria can lead to an incremental and progressive undertaking to exceed them. It is also compatible with the "risk and proportionality" approach to QA, which is rooted in the idea that scrutiny of institutions in a system should be proportional to (or commensurate with) the perceived risk associated with a given provider. The Green Paper floated a classification scheme that extended from "lack or minimal awareness of QA practices" at one end of the spectrum to "best practices in QA" for an institution at the other end of the spectrum. In the new Teaching Excellence Framework, introduced last year in Britain and intended as a companion piece to the Research Excellence Framework there, institutional applicants for recognition, which will depend on assessments done collaboratively by the QAA and the Higher Education Funding Councils, can be accorded a slot in gold, silver and bronze categories. It will be fascinating to see if an "own the podium" mentality picks up steam there.

Last, I'll put in a personal plug for two ideas that are on my personal wish list for emerging QA trends. The first is that governments or QA agencies themselves should coax or cajole all institutions in their jurisdictions to display on their websites comprehensive information about their internal QA mechanisms, as applied to both their degree and non-degree programs. The second comes from the action items in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report. How ready are QA agencies for new kinds of programs or new kinds of institutions that specialize in indigenous knowledge? Will the dominant pedagogical and epistemological paradigms that Canadian QA agencies have adopted in setting their standards and the criteria used to evaluate quality suffice under these new circumstances?

Those, then, are my impressions of where we are now in quality assurance and where we seem to be headed. I welcome questions and comments in the time remaining.