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**Largely a Matter of Degrees: Quality Assurance and Canadian Universities**

Julian Weinrib

Glen A. Jones

(University of Toronto)

**Abstract:**

*There is no national accreditation or quality assurance mechanism for Canadian higher education. This paper argues that a number of structural characteristics that emerged as a function of the transition to mass higher education have served to stymie the development of government quality assurance mechanisms, including the decentralization of higher education policy, the development of a relatively homogeneous university sector, and the limited policy capacity of provincial ministries. The development of new types of degrees, combined with an expansion of degree-authority to new institutional types have led to the emergence of new quality mechanisms in several provinces designed to assess the quality of new degrees, but it is the universities that continue to play the central role in terms of quality assurance.*

**Introduction:**

Canada has long been an outlier in the international trend towards the emergence of national quality assessment mechanisms and the expanding use of these mechanisms to regulate universities. Like the United States and some other federal systems, higher education policy in Canada is largely in the hands of the provinces, but even at this level, Canadian higher education largely avoided the “quality debate” of the 1980s and danced around the push for new quality assessment mechanisms and demands for accountability associated with the neo-liberal agenda that has ebbed and flowed through the country over the last few decades (Fisher, Rubenson, Shanahan & Trottier, 2014; Jones, 1996a). The end result is a decentralized network of provincial systems that now largely leave the responsibility for quality assessment in the hands of the individual universities, and where the government’s modest interventions have primarily been a response to quality assurance issues associated with new university-level degrees offered by new providers.

Our objective in this paper is to explain why Canada has not followed the international trend towards the development of elaborate quality assurance mechanisms. Recognizing that the methodological issues associated with proving why something did not happen are far more challenging than documenting that it did, it is important to acknowledge that our core arguments are based largely on our detailed understanding of the history and evolution of the Canadian case. We begin by reviewing the contextual features of the Canadian system that have served to stymie the emergence of large-scale reforms in terms of quality assurance. We then discuss how issues of quality have been taken up at the national and provincial levels in the new millennium before offering some concluding observations.

**Evolution of Higher Education in Canada and the Issue of Quality**

Following decades of rapid transformation as a function of the post-war transition from elite to mass higher education, the 1970s were a period of relative structural stability within Canadian higher education. The institutional types, structures and system-level arrangements that had emerged by the end of the 1960s continued to characterize the university sector, with only minor modifications to policy, until at least the mid-1990s (Jones, 1996). The structural characteristics that had clearly emerged during this period played a central role in how issues of higher education quality were taken-up, and largely framed the political discourse of accountability.

The first and most important of these characteristics was decentralization. The Canadian constitutional arrangements assigned responsibility for education to the provinces, and while the federal government had played a large role in initiating and funding the dramatic post-war expansion of universities and university enrolment, by the 1960s it had become clear that the provinces were unwilling to tolerate federal interference. Unlike the United States, there would be no national department of education or higher education, or anything resembling a national strategy. Higher education policy was highly decentralized, with each province creating its own provincial “system” of universities and other institutional types that would address the specific needs of the province. For the most part, these provincial systems were also characterized by high levels of university autonomy, effectively decentralizing policy decisions for most key academic issues, such as admissions, curriculum, degree standards, and program quality, to the individual institutions. The emergence of quite distinct provincial systems, combined with the fierce protection of provincial powers under the constitutional debates of the 1970s and 1980s, effectively silenced any discussion of national higher education initiatives, including a national quality assurance framework (Jones, 2009a).

The second important characteristic was the emergence of a relatively homogeneous university sector. While higher education policy was decentralized to the provinces, a common “model” of a Canadian university had emerged in the post-war period, largely influenced by the traditions and structures of the mature, established public universities (Jones, 1996b; 1998). Canadian universities were secular, publicly supported institutions with both a research and teaching function. They shared similar degree structures and governance arrangements. Most were comprehensive institutions with some combination of undergraduate, professional and graduate programs. An entire sector of private denominational universities transformed into publicly funded secular institutions or affiliated with secular provincial universities in response to government funding policies. Isomorphism ran rampant as new universities moved quickly to take on the characteristics of their more established peers. The homogeneity of the sector was also reinforced by the national association of university leaders, the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, which provided a forum for the exchange of information on institutional issues. There were clearly differences between institutions in terms of program mix and research strength, but the universities were generally treated as equals by governments, and there was no formal stratification within the sector. Perhaps more importantly, the universities treated each other as equals, largely treating each other’s degrees and standards as equivalent. There was no need for a national accreditation system or standardized graduate admissions testing because there was an assumption within the system that all universities were providing a good quality undergraduate education (Jones, 2009a).

This homogeneity was further reinforced by the fact that each province essentially treated degree-granting as a public monopoly (Skolnik, 1997). It was impossible to create new universities or offer degrees without provincial government approval, and the provinces tightly controlled the number of universities and only assigned degree-granting authority to these provincially designated institutions.

A third important characteristic was the limited policy capacity within the provincial government ministries that were responsible for universities. High levels of institutional autonomy meant that there were only modest levels of system coordination. Ministries were generally preoccupied with the three key policy issues that dominated provincial policy discussions across the country: access, tuition and government grants (Jones, 2009a; 2012). Increasing access to higher education was, and continues to be, the core policy issue for provincial governments across the country, and funding and accountability were commonly tied to these key themes. Only the most populace provinces had policy units within government with some capacity to study higher education issues, and the modest policy capacity of these units was frequently eroded as a function of government restructuring and cutbacks to the civil service (Jones, 2004; 2012). When the provincial governments in Alberta and Ontario began to push for greater accountability for quality within the higher education system as a function of neo-liberal reforms, the policy solution was performance indicators and modest forms of performance funding which had minimal impact on these systems (Lang, 2002). The suggestion of developing a quality assurance agency would have been anathema to provincial politicians who were decreasing the size and role of government and reducing the number of advisory agencies and boards.

This is not to suggest that issues of quality were simply ignored within Canadian higher education, but rather that it was the institutions, rather than government, which had assumed the primary responsibility for monitoring and addressing quality issues. Concerns with the rapid growth in the number of graduate programs offered by Ontario universities in the 1960s led the universities to create the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies to assess the quality of new graduate programs. The work of the Council would evolve to include periodic reviews of all graduate programs in the province, and its recommendations would become tied to government funding of graduate program enrolment (Jones, 1991). Perhaps the most heated debates on issues of quality in undergraduate education came as a result of a report funded by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada which called on universities to develop a national system of performance indicators and become more transparent on issues of educational quality (Smith, 1991). A key theme in these discussions was that, given the mechanisms that had emerged in the United Kingdom, Australia and some American states, there were huge dangers associated with government intervention in the area of quality assessment (Bruneau & Savage, 2002; Cutt & Dobell, 1992), and that it was important for universities to focus attention on quality assessment at the institutional level to stave off government interference.

The development and evolution of mass higher education in Canada, therefore, had led to the emergence of a highly decentralized policy environment where degree-granting authority was limited to provincially supported universities and the number of these institutions was tightly controlled by government. A relatively common model of the university had developed, supported by the work of a national university club (AUCC), and the fact that these institutions treated each other’s credentials as being roughly equivalent meant that there was no need for institutional accreditation or quality assessment mechanisms. Governments had little capacity to intervene, but they also saw little reason to given other political priorities and the general assumption that decisions on academic quality were best left in the hands of the individual institutions.

However, modest modifications to these structural arrangements began to emerge in the 1990s as governments sought ways of continuing to expand access to higher education, especially access to degree programs. While universities had traditionally been the only institutional types with the authority to grant degrees, some provinces began to extend this authority to other institutions, and to allow for the creation of new types of degree credentials (Marshall, 2008), and these changes began to raise policy issues concerning the mechanisms for approving new degree programs from new types of institutions, and the recognition of new credentials and degree types. These changes have had implications for both pan-Canadian and provincial policy initiatives related to quality.

**Pan-Canadian Initiatives:**

Two organizations have emerged to support the discussion and coordination of quality-centered policies at the national level, both amongst the provincial and territorial governments, which have legislative authority over the degree-granting institutions within their jurisdictions, and amongst universities across provincial boundaries. The Council of Ministries of Education, Canada (CMEC), an intergovernmental body comprised of all provincial and territorial ministers of education, represents the largest and most notable educational policy organization in Canada, and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), a membership-based advocacy group of 97 public and private universities and degree-granting colleges, has emerged in the non-governmental arena. The following section outlines the limited role these organizations have played in establishing the most basic levels of a national quality framework, and reveals the extent to which institutions remain the primary arbiters of their own quality in the Canadian context.

CMEC – Intergovernmental

Despite being comprised of the all education-related ministers from Canada’s provinces and territories, CMEC holds no legislative authority at either a national or provincial level over any educational issue; it’s primary mandate is to facilitate policy discussions between the provincial/territorial education ministries, and it is intended to act as an advisory or signaling agent for educational policy issues across the national K-12 and post-secondary sectors. Provincial governments are not beholden to the policy positions supported by CMEC, and often deviate substantially from them as a result of regional differences in the needs and objectives of their respective higher education sectors. However, in most cases the positions advocated by CMEC do represent a relatively coherent vision for the aggregate provincial higher education sectors and, despite the lack of authority, represents the closest approximation of a national policy body in Canada.

In regard to issues of quality and accreditation, the most recent CMEC position was put forward in 2007 in the form of a non-binding “Ministerial Statement” (CMEC, 2007). At the most fundamental level, the document reinforces both the strong history of institutional autonomy within Canada’s university sector and the reluctance of the provincial governments to increase their involvement in the regulation or oversight over the universities in their jurisdictions. The document re-emphasizes that universities should remain the primary agents in the sector’s quality assurance processes, and that the optimal role for the provincial ministries is to ensure that the audit and peer-review systems used by the universities are suitable or appropriate to the their institutional context; “ministers expect postsecondary institutions in each province/territory to be committed to working with other postsecondary institutions, transfer agencies, and governments, as appropriate…governments are responsible for assuring…that appropriate forms of quality assurance are in place in all degree-granting institutions” (ibid, 2007, 1). This statement confirms that at Canada’s highest level of governmental policy deliberation there remains widespread support for quality assurance to remain the responsibility of the university sector itself, and for external or non-university actors to remain arms-length from the process. The sole exceptions are in the case of professions with independent regulatory or professional accreditation processes, where profession-specific bodies can set entry-to-practice standards for related programs that may or may not be adopted by the institution offering the program (ibid, 3). The general conclusion of the ministerial statement is that academic stakeholders are at the core of Canada’s quality assurance mechanisms.

One area where CMEC has become actively engaged is through the establishment of the Canadian Degree Qualification Framework (CDQF). In the absence of a formal national-level mechanism for accrediting universities or for setting and enforcing shared institutional or programmatic standards and benchmarks, CMEC developed the CDQF as a key reference point for provincial or institutional quality assurance processes amongst the three principle degree levels offered in Canada (Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Doctoral). CMEC’s efforts build on the work of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which established degree-specific parameters at the supra-national level for its three major degree cycles (Bachelor’s, Master’s and Doctoral). These parameters, or qualification frameworks, represent “generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences” (EHEA, 2005, 1), and participating jurisdictions “committed themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA” (ibid, 1).

While the EHEA efforts were in support of cross-national qualification alignment under the umbrella of the Bologna Process, the Canadian context shares similar elements to the EHEA experience; just as European countries sought to increase the compatibility and transferability of their three primary degrees without relinquishing legislative autonomy over their educational systems, the Canadian provinces sought to accomplish similar goals at a sub-national level. In this vein, the CDQF process established a generic rubric from which provinces and their institutions could draw from in establishing provincial learning outcomes and degree qualifications, but did so in such a way that regional differentiation was still maintained. Almost all Canadian provinces have supplemented the CDQF with provincial frameworks that aim to align institutional degree objectives and learning outcomes with provincial expectations for degree quality, though the mechanisms for this process vary by province. While there are slight variations in the construction and implementation of the provincial degree qualification frameworks, the details of the frameworks themselves are relatively comparable in nature and scope. As such, the provincial section of this paper will not explore them in greater detail.

AUCC – Non-governmental

In the non-governmental arena, the AUCC has emerged as Canada’s largest and most influential research and advocacy organization for post-secondary institutions. It is a membership-based organization comprised of universities, colleges and other post-secondary institutions from across the country’s provinces and territories. Its mandate is to advocate for higher education, undertake research and develop public policy recommendations, share information about the post-secondary sector and its member institutions, and coordinate an array of programs to support its member institutions and their constituents.

With regard to quality assurance processes, in many ways, attaining membership within the AUCC acts as a *de facto* accreditation process in the Canadian higher education landscape, a process that would be categorized as professional self-regulation under the framework developed by Dill and Beerkens (2013). The Association has established 12 membership requirements that mirror many accreditation criteria in other jurisdictions and place priority on the ability of institutions to govern themselves with autonomy from external or non-academic bodies or forces. These criteria are part of an “’institutional assessment’, examining the institution for the requirements necessary to deliver the degree outcomes expected of a bachelor’s or higher degree” (Marshall, 2008, p. 8). Some of the key requirements for membership-seeking institutions are[[1]](#footnote-1):

* (The institution) has governance and an administrative structure appropriate to a university;
* (The institution) has an approved, clearly articulated and widely known and accepted mission statement and academic goals that are appropriate to a university and that demonstrate its commitment to:
  + teaching and other forms of dissemination of knowledge;
  + research, scholarship, academic inquiry and the advancement of knowledge;
  + service to the community.
* (The institution) has as its core teaching mission the provision of education of university standard with the majority of its programs at that level.
* (The institution) offers a full program or programs of undergraduate and/or graduate studies that animate its mission and goals, and that lead to a university degree or degrees conferred by itself or, if federated or affiliated with, or a constituent of a university, by the parent institution
* (The institution) has a proven record of scholarship, academic inquiry and research, expects its academic staff to be engaged in externally peer-reviewed research and to publish in externally disseminated sources, and provides appropriate time and institutional support for them to do so.
* (The institution’s) approach to the protection of academic freedom respects the spirit of the [AUCC Statement on Academic Freedom](http://www.aucc.ca/media-room/news-and-commentary/canadas-universities-adopt-new-statement-on-academic-freedom) which was approved by the membership on October 25, 2011 and as may be amended by the membership from time to time.
* (The institution) operates on a Not-for-Profit basis.
* (The institution) satisfies the Board, after receiving a report by a visiting committee appointed by the Board, that it is providing education of university standard and meets the criteria for membership in the Association.

These types of principles and membership criteria, put forward by a self-governing membership-based assembly of universities and degree-granting institutions, foregrounds the centrality of institutional autonomy in the Canadian higher education sector. The AUCC implicitly seeks to circumvent efforts by external bodies to implement a regulatory framework where power is housed outside of the institutions and their constituent academics. Perhaps the sole exception is in the context of specific professions that have historical precedent for strong profession-specific accreditation processes and regulatory organizations (e.g., law, medicine, engineering).

While the membership criteria can be viewed as a form of accreditation, the AUCC has also been creating a series of “principles of institutional quality assurance” intended to guide institutional practices amongst its members. The general AUCC stance regarding quality is that member institutions are ultimately responsible for ensuring that they are meeting the goals and objectives laid out in their mission statements and strategic planning processes, and that they should undergo regular, cyclical self-evaluation and peer review processes in order to maintain their standards[[2]](#footnote-2). As stated on the AUCC website, “robust institutional quality assurance policies and processes are the foundation of the Canadian higher education quality assurance regime”[[3]](#footnote-3). As Baker and Miosi (2010) indicate in their analysis of Canadian quality assurance regimes, the AUCC principles and guidelines reinforce the common Canadian standard of shared governance; students, faculty members and university administrators are all to be included in QA and review processes, and are augmented by the involvement of external disciplinary experts, ensuring that the process is not entirely insular to the institution.

AUCC has come to play an important role in quality assurance within Canadian higher education. The expansion of degree-granting and the emergence of new institutional types in some provinces have led to an increasing number of institutions seeking membership in this “national club” of universities. The membership criteria serve to reinforce the characteristics of the traditional Canadian model and have a homogenizing influence on the sector, but the criteria also reassert the importance of university autonomy on issues of quality.

**Provincial Initiatives:**

As outlined above, the historical absence of federal government authority over educational policies and institutions has resulted in provincial and territorial governments having authority over the establishment and oversight of all degree-granting institutions. In that regard, issues of quality assurance and accreditation were rather straightforward historically; except for a small section of private/religious institutions, since only institutions labeled as “universities” were allowed to offer baccalaureate degree programs and all Canadian universities were chartered by their respective provincial governments as not-for-profit corporations, the act of legislation was a proxy for accreditation in and of itself. However, as regional pressures and conditions diverged, many provincial governments have been required to adapt the traditional ‘accreditation by legislation’ standard in order to meet the challenges raised by the changing degree-granting environment.

The following section will explore how the four Canadian provinces with the largest post-secondary education systems have adapted their accreditation and quality assurance systems to address these issues within their own jurisdictions. The impact of such changes on traditional university governance models in the provinces will also be examined. This section is divided into two sub-groupings of provinces: the first includes two provinces whose provincial governments created independent government agencies to approve, and in some cases monitor, new and existing degree programs (British Columbia and Alberta), while the second grouping includes two provinces where the oversight of degree approval and quality assurance have been left under the control of the universities themselves through the creation of provincial consortia (Ontario and Quebec).

While the following provincial analyses will highlight a number of differences in the scale and scope of the revised regulatory systems, the commonalities that are highlighted by the cross-provincial analysis are more forceful and important, and can be aggregated into a relatively consistent narrative for the various quality assurance and accreditation processes currently active across the country; the increased demand for access to baccalaureate and baccalaureate-like degrees since the mid-1990s has led to increasingly differentiated provincial post-secondary systems, be it through an increase in degree types or a fragmentation of the traditional two-sector system. As a result, traditional distinctions in the nature and purpose of the university have been called into question. The development of University-Colleges in BC, the introduction of foundational degrees at two Alberta colleges, and the introduction of applied degrees in a number of provinces all signaled the need for more flexible systems capable of providing an increasing percentage of the population with access to degrees. In response, the provinces have been forced to adapt their relatively loose regulatory frameworks which traditionally accepted the act of legislation as a university as a marker of quality in and of itself, and have moved parts of the monitoring and approval process into intermediary agencies either housed within government ministries or independent from such ministries.

In the absence of federal regulation or oversight, the provincial governments have attempted to address the challenges as appropriate to local conditions. However, for all the discussion or provincial distinctness and autonomy, and the reality of a decentralized “national” system, the majority of the provinces have adopted nearly identical frameworks for the evaluation and accreditation of universities and their degree programs; institutional and professional autonomy remain cornerstones of the provincial systems, the granting of traditional baccalaureate degrees remains almost exclusively within the purview of universities, and quality assurance processes remain primarily intended to ensure the quality of new degree programs at post-secondary institutions that have not historically been allowed to offer such degree. While each province has increased systemic differentiation to some extent, the monopoly over baccalaureate degrees remains with the universities and the ability for institutions to be categorized as universities remains an issue of provincial legislation.

Government-Established Quality Assurance: British Columbia and Alberta

The current context in Alberta, and in many other provinces which decided to follow-suit, began with the 1995 decision to allow an institution in the college sector, Mount Royal College, to offer a new type of degree, the “applied baccalaureate degree”. This marked the first time in Canada’s history that a non-university institution was able to offer a baccalaureate credential, and it was the first step towards a new era of increased systemic differentiation both within Alberta and across the country (Marshall, 2004). While the applied degrees differed in many important respects from the traditional baccalaureate, they destabilized the traditional foundations of the quality paradigm within which all Canadian universities operated; the university sector monopoly over degree provision was no longer a certainty. As new types of degrees were approved in some other provinces, questions regarding quality and comparability arose, as a new type of institution and degree required translation for students, families, employers and even the other post-secondary institutions within the provinces.

One of the results of Alberta’s applied degree initiative was the 2003 *Post-secondary Learning Act*, which brought all publicly funded post-secondary institutions under a single legislation, and which created the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) as the central assessment and advisory agency for the provincial Ministry of Advanced Training and Education. CAQC is mandated to review all new degree program applications, including degrees offered by non-resident institutions, as well as proposals for significant changes to existing degree programs[[4]](#footnote-4). While all decisions ultimately rest with the Minister, the CAQC has been empowered with a primary role in the establishment and maintenance of degree and program standards within the province. This development allowed the Alberta government to provide a level of accreditation-like assurances for the new degree programs being offered by universities and colleges alike; all degrees approved by the CAQC are assumed to be at the required standard of quality for the respective type of degree (Marshall, 2004, 87).

However, despite the new approach implemented by the Alberta government, which could be viewed as instantiating a tighter regulatory environment, key legacies of the traditional process remain firmly entrenched and ensure the centrality of strong institutional self-governance within the province. As stated in the CAQC 2011 *Quality Assessment Standards – Program* document, “the responsibility for the quality of programs and for their ongoing review and improvement rests with the institutions. It is Council’s responsibility to ensure that appropriate standards are met” (CAQC, 2011, 1), and by Principle 15 of the CAQC *Key Operating Principles*, “the Council recognizes that the primary responsibility for academic and institutional quality assurance rests within the post-secondary institutions themselves” (CAQC, 2010, 1). Additionally, though it is not required by the Ministry, “the practice has been that almost all of the (Council) members are qualified and experienced academics”, and a key component of the evaluation process is peer-review.

One area where the CAQC is mandated to do more than just review applications is the ongoing monitoring of degree programs. In 2009, the *Programs of Study Regulation* provided the CAQC with expanded responsibilities to “ensure compliance with the Council’s standards and conditions once a degree program has been approved” (CAQC, 2013, 5). Based solely on a referral from the Minister, the CAQC may:

a) review and monitor a degree program to ensure compliance with the standards and conditions established under section 7;

b) require a report from the governing body of an institution on any matter relating to an approved or proposed degree program that the institutions offers or proposes to offer, and;

c) appoint persons to provide advance and recommendations relation to the review and evaluation by the Council of a degree program under clause (a) or section 5 (Government of Alberta, 2009, 3-4).

If the CAQC determines that the standards or conditions of degree granting privileges are not met, the Minister may cancel the approval of one or more degree programs, or, in the case of private colleges, may recommend the rescinding of the private colleges ability to grant degrees (ibid, 4). However, this review process is not required on a cyclical basis and appears to be reserved for when particular circumstances call for external review. It should also be noted that the review process is undertaken by the standard council members and not by Ministry agents.

Despite the limited monitoring function, the establishment of the CAQC by the provincial government as an arms-length intermediary agency with jurisdiction over quality control in the province’s degree granting institutions, the primary evaluative mechanisms and processes still reside within the auspices of academic professionals; university or programmatic governance and accreditation have not been outsourced to independent, non-academic bureaucrats or administrators, the managerial and governance practices within universities have not been substantially altered, and the assessment of academic performance is still housed within the institutions themselves.

The context in British Columbia is similar to that of Alberta, in that a major systemic shift in degree granting privileges ultimately resulted in significant revisions to the evaluation and regulation of post-secondary institutions. However, in addition to approving new degrees, British Columbia also awarded degree-granting authority to a number of non-university institutions and created a new institutional type: the university college. This new institutional category was meant to address the demand for increased access to baccalaureate degrees by providing “an ‘upper level university college component’ at existing (community) colleges in densely populated areas outside of Vancouver and Victoria” (Levin, 2003, 61).

While the university college as a new institutional type faltered in the province, with all five of these institutions either becoming universities or being absorbed into existing universities as branch campuses, their creation was integral to a number of broader challenges and processes around the granting of degrees and the quality of degree programs whose legacies within the provincial system overshadow the creation and failure of the institutions themselves (Levin, 2003). As Fisher et al., indicate in their 2009 study, “most recently, degree-granting status has been granted to virtually all PSE institutions in a hierarchy of undergraduate and graduate applied and ‘pure’ degrees” (Fisher et al., 2009, 555), which is in many ways a direct legacy of the initial university college experiment.

In response to the fragmentation of the traditional degree-granting system, the provincial government established a more comprehensive quality control system that was intended to be more attuned to the respective institutional and degree types. An independent advisory body was created by the government and tasked to make recommendations to the Minister of Advanced Education on issues relating to the assessment of proposals for new degree programs. In 2002, through the *Degree Authorization Act*, the provincial government established the Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB) to review and approve new degree program proposals in the expanded system (DQAB, 2008, 1).

The restructuring of the degree approval and quality control apparatus in British Columbia occurred through three major Acts; the *University Act* mandated that “all public universities cannot establish a new degree program without the approval of the Minister” (ibid, 2); the *College and Institute Act*, whereby the “Minister may designate by order, applied baccalaureate degree programs at British Columbia public colleges and baccalaureate degree programs and applied master’s degree programs at British Columbia public university colleges and provincial institutes” (ibid, 2); and the Degree Authorization Act, which “applies to all private and out-of-province public institutions” (ibid, 1).

As in Alberta, the above requires all publicly-funded post-secondary institutions to apply to an independent intermediary agency, the DQAB, in order to obtain Ministry approval to offer new degree programs or to make major modifications to existing programs. One significant difference in the BC context is that a provision in the process allows “institutions with proven track records (ten years’ history in enrolling students in programs at a particular degree level in British Columbia) and appropriate governance mechanisms in place” (ibid, 3) with the ability to apply for “exempt status” at a specific degree level in order to bypass the application process for offering new degrees (ibid, 3). In this way, institutions with a history of high-quality degree provision, supplemented by rigorous internal quality assessment processes, are eligible for higher levels of institutional autonomy within the system when it comes to the establishment of new degree programs.

University-Established Quality Assurance: Ontario and Quebec

Unlike the British Columbia and Alberta cases, the expansion of degree granting to the college sector in Ontario did not lead to the development of a quality assessment mechanism to review all new degrees, instead the province created the Postsecondary Quality Assessment Board to review applications for new degrees from Ontario colleges or out-of-province institutions seeking approval to offer degree program in Ontario (Jones, 2004). Quality assurance processes for university degree programs offered by Ontario universities continue to be been driven by the university sector itself, with institutions engaging the issues that have arisen in other provinces as a means of dissuading or forestalling government intervention within the sector. Historically, the oversight and monitoring of quality baccalaureate and graduate degree program quality in Ontario has occurred under the purview of the institutions themselves, through the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV), comprised of the Academic Vice-Presidents of each university in the province, or, at the graduate level, through the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) (COU, 2010, 1). These processes did not occur in complete isolation from the provincial Ministries with jurisdiction over the university system, but the systems established and maintained by OCAV to evaluate and monitor quality-related processes held no guarantees that specific government requests or interests would be incorporated into the overarching evaluative frameworks or schema. This system is emblematic of the extremely strong history of autonomy enjoyed by universities in Ontario, and the reticence of successive provincial governments to attempt major structural changes to the system in order to limit institutional autonomy in relation to the government (Jones, 2004; Fisher et al., 2009, 555).

In 2006, the Council of Ontario Universities (COU), an inter-institutional coordinating and advocacy organization comprised of representatives from each Ontario university but also possessing internal staffing and research capacity, established a working group to investigate the quality assurance practices of the OCGS, which culminated in the 2007 Van Loon Report and the establishment of a new quality assurance body and framework operationalized under the direction of OCAV (COU, 2010, 2). The Ontario Universities Council of Quality Assurance, heretofore referred to as the Quality Council, was established in 2010, with associated sub-Committees established for a number of specific evaluative and consultative tasks (ibid, 2). As described by COU, “the Council operates at arm’s length from universities and the government to ensure its independence. Moreover, in establishing the Quality Council, 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” (ibid, 2).

As an institution-driven process based on the above principles, each institution is empowered to develop their own Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) that is “consistent not just with their own mission statements and their university Degree Level Expectations, but also with the protocols of (the Quality Council Quality Assurance Framework)” (ibid, 2). As such, the Quality Council possesses final authority over the appraisal of proposed new undergraduate programs. However, each institution is responsible for the actual evaluation of new programs and the cyclical review of existing degree programs (ibid, 3). The Quality Council outlines the specifics of the steps and processes expected for each of these evaluative procedures within the 2011 *Quality Assurance Framework* document (ibid, 8-28).

As the above suggests, universities in Ontario are empowered at the most fundamental level with regards to all quality-related review processes. To wit, the provincial university consortium has claimed jurisdiction over the operational definition of ‘quality’ itself in relation to all quality review processes. This power is nowhere more evident than with the establishment of the COU Degree Level Expectations (DLE), the provincial university-level manifestation of the Canadian Degree Qualification Framework outlined in the first section of this chapter. As outlined by COU, the Ontario DLEs “serve as Ontario universities’ academic standards and identify the knowledge and skill outcome competencies that reflect progressive levels of intellectual and creative development…graduates at specified degree levels are expected to demonstrate these competencies” (ibid, 4). In the Ontario case, the universities themselves have established the provincial DLEs, with reference to the provincial government’s Ontario Qualification Framework but with ultimate authority over both the definition and application of the terms. In addition, “each university has undertaken to adapt and describe the degree level expectations that will apply within its own institutions. Likewise, academic units will describe their institution’s expectations in terms appropriate to its academic program(s)” (ibid, 4).

At each step of the above sequence, quality-related processes are further adapted to the contexts of more localized units of governance and application, the Council to the institution to the academic unit or department, which is the ultimate manifestation of autonomy for universities and their academic communities. The oversight and application of ‘quality’ is left almost entirely in the realm of academic professionals and divorced from external government processes. It can be concluded that the COU apparatus has pre-emptively neutered the potential for external intervention in university governance and monitoring in a provincial system that was already reluctant to interfere in university affairs. It is interesting to note that many of the quality processes are similar in nature to those in BC and Alberta, however, the administering of these processes by the university community itself is a significant difference, both in the implementation and in the discursive signaling the processes represent; the university community in Ontario can position its autonomy in a more radical way than universities’ in the aforementioned provinces, which undoubtedly has implications on other political processes.

Similar to the Ontario context, baccalaureate degree program approval and oversight in Quebec has historically resided within the university-sector itself. The Conférence des Recteurs et des Principaux des Universités du Québec (CREPUQ), established in 1963 as a voluntary coordinating body by Quebec universities, has jurisdiction within the province over quality-related processes in baccalaureate degree programs. In general, while the particularities of the quality review and program approval processes differ somewhat in the Quebec, the underpinning framework remains the same; the university sector has a long established primacy over quality-related issues and have developed a series of administrative mechanisms to evaluate the quality of new baccalaureate degree programs and review the quality of pre-existing programs (Baker & Mioso, 2010, 43; CREPUQ, 2011, 1).

The role of CREPUQ is generally equivalent to that of COU in the Ontario context, and two committees are in operation that perform similar functions to the Ontario Quality Council; the New Program Evaluation Commission (CEP) and the Program Evaluation Review Commission (CVEP) are responsible for assessing the quality of new program proposals and auditing institutional policies and practices relating to existing programs, respectively (Baker & Mioso, 2010, 43). As in Ontario, the primary evaluative component of these processes are housed within the university sector; either through the 8-member CEP committee made up of university teaching staff with experience on high-level university administrative councils or committees, or through institution-specific evaluation systems that are reviewed by the CVEP to ensure “the appropriateness of institutional policies and practices with respect to the goals, stages, criteria and procedures defined under the terms of the Policy” (ibid, 44).

The latter process is not an evaluation or assessment of academic programs, but rather an audit of the university’s internal evaluative processes to ensure that they are consistent with those laid down formally in the university governance policies. As Baker & Mioso conclude, “the direct assessment of the program is the responsibility of the institution’s academic community (i.e. faculty, staff and students) and the external experts who are engaged by the institution to conduct a site visit and prepare either a single report or individual reports” (ibid, 46). Thus, as in the three provinces described above, the evaluation of program quality ultimately resides with the academic community itself, both within the university and drawing on pertinent expertise from outside the university.

It must be noted that the massive protests associated with the 2012 “Maple Spring” in Quebec served to destabilize the higher education system in that province and quality assurance is one of many issues currently being reviewed by the provincial government. The future of CREPUQ, and its role in quality assessment within the system, is also uncertain (Bégin-Caouette & Jones, 2014).

**Concluding Observations:**

The history of quality assessment as a policy issue in Canada is quite different from how this issue has been taken up in many other jurisdictions. The decentralization of higher education policy in Canada has effectively eliminated the possibility of a national accreditation or quality assurance system. The development of a relatively homogeneous university model meant that universities generally treated each other as peers and recognized each other’s credentials. Degree-granting was treated as a public monopoly, and provincial governments tightly controlled the number of universities and the authority to grant degrees.

Recent policy changes, especially the expansion of degree-granting authority to other institutional types, and the emergence of new hybrid university types, have raised important questions about quality within Canadian higher education. Six Canadian provinces (and one territory, the Yukon), including most recently Saskatchewan in 2012, have now provided at least some form of degree-granting authority to institutions within the community college sector (Jones, 2009b). It is these changes, rather than broader issues of university quality or accountability, that have underscored recent reforms related to quality assessment. As noted in the cases of British Columbia and Alberta described above, some provinces have now created agencies to review the quality of applications for new degrees, though it seems clear that the implications of these changes for the traditional universities has been rather modest, and greater latitude is assigned to the mature universities. In Ontario and Quebec, it is the universities themselves, through the work of their provincial organization, that continues to play the major role in assuring quality within these systems.

The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada has developed a degree qualifications framework to promote a pan-Canadian approach to credential assessment and recognition, but has reasserted the important role of individual institutions in assessing the quality of university education. In the absence of a national quality assessment mechanism, AUCC, the national university club, has come to play an important role through the review of applications for membership, effectively functioning as a national accrediting agency, and as such, reasserting a common definition of a Canadian university, including its autonomy over issues of quality and academic policy.

The national and provincial responses outlined above have worked to maintain the general status quo for degree provision and quality assurance in the country in response to mounting pressures from both provincial governments and the general public for perpetually increasing access to degrees and stronger regimes of accountability for the massive public expenditure associated with traditional university structures. Despite the relatively stability of provincial systems to this point, there is a growing sense in some jurisdictions that a major re-evaluation and restructuring of post-secondary systems will be required in the near future; be it the push of student groups in Quebec’s Maple Spring outlined above, the renewed push in Ontario for greater institutional differentiation (MTCU, 2013), with the implicit potential for increased degree provision at colleges or other new types of institutions (Jones & Skolnik, 2009), or efforts at the federal level for a comprehensive internationalization strategy, which calls for the doubling of international students in Canada (DFATDC, 2014) and stronger quality assurance mechanisms to ensure institutions hosting international students have attained the highest level of educational quality[[5]](#footnote-5). These types of changes to the environment of degree provision within and across the provinces will continue to put pressure on governments and universities alike to address the demand for “quality” in an era of increased global competition and public accountability.

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1. <http://www.aucc.ca/about-us/member-universities/membership-eligibility/criteria-to-become-a-member/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.aucc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/Principles_of_institutional.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.aucc.ca/canadian-universities/quality-assurance/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this instance, “degree” refers to Applied, Baccalaureate, Master’s and Doctoral degrees, and does not include Divinity degrees. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. http://www.newsroom.gov.bc.ca/2014/02/new-requirements-benefit-international-students.html [↑](#footnote-ref-5)