Theme 2:

Innovation in Quality Assurance: Developing a comprehensive quality assurance system where none other exists.

Abstract

Because education in Canada is a provincial responsibility, the country lacks a comprehensive approach to quality assurance in higher education. Within the Province of Ontario there are currently four organizations that address issues related to quality assurance of higher education; however they operate under differing agendas and serve differing populations. This session will look specifically at the work of the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service: its design, development and growth since its inception in 2005. During the time of its operation the Service has been through two external reviews and modeled continuous improvement as it continues to provide program-level and institutional-level quality assurance for the province's 24 public colleges of applied arts and technology.

Proposal

Quality Assurance for higher education institutions in Canada is fragmented and provincially determined. Where quality assurance organizations exist, they tend to be government agencies or created as arms-length government agencies. As such they lack independence to make substantial, unbiased quality assurance decisions. Within the current Canadian context there is no model of institutional accreditation and very little independent external quality assessment or quality assurance at the institutional or organizational levels. The tradition of program-based quality review and accreditation is well established in the institutions of higher education in Canada, and is generally conducted along professional or disciplinary lines. The exception to this situation is now found in Ontario's public college system.

Ontario's public colleges (known as colleges of applied arts and technology) were created in the late 1960's with a view to providing a skilled workforce through applied postsecondary education. The colleges were created as an alternative to the province's existing public universities that had been operating for (in some cases) decades. This resulted in the creation of a different and parallel system of higher education in the province: universities, on one hand, providing a more traditional, theory-based educational experience; and, colleges, on the other hand, providing an applied, career-focused educational experience. Over the years the separation of college and university has waxed and waned to the point where we now find some joint programming between the two systems.

In 2002, the provincial government of Ontario introduced legislation that fundamentally changed the way the college system would 'do business', including the business of quality assurance. In

exchange for more autonomy and responsibility to approve their own programs of instruction, colleges were mandated to develop a self-regulatory quality assurance service that would be independent from government and from any one institution. The initial focus of this quality assurance service was at the program level. Details underscoring this focus as a starting point are found in legislation, regulations and government policy that will be shared as part of the presentation.

This session will consider the development of this self-regulatory mechanism, known as the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS), and trace the innovative changes that have occurred as a result of the services commitment to regular review and continuous improvement: principles that it holds out for the colleges and that it practices itself.

The OCQAS's commitment to continuous improvement and innovation began with an external review and evaluation being conducted 6 months after the service began operating. The results of this evaluation were incorporated and the OCQAS further developed and created an institutional-level quality audit process. This development represented the first step in having independent and external reviews of the college's quality assurance practices and policies done.

After 5 years the OCQAS again commissioned an external review and evaluation which led to further changes, refinements and innovative developments. One of the findings of this evaluation was that the OCQAS had all the right pieces in place to become an accrediting agency for the colleges in Ontario. The Service subsequently made application to INQAAHE to be recognized as an organization that met the Guidelines of Good Practice. Recognition was received, making the OCQAS (at that time) only the seventh agency to receive this recognition, the first in Canada, and the second in North America.

Following on the receipt of INQAAHE's recognition, the OCQAS continued to develop its quality assurance process and, in May of 2012, received approval from its constituent members (the Presidents of the 24 colleges) to move from a quality audit process to an accreditation process: again a first in Canada.

This session, through presentation and discussion, will document the innovative changes that the OCQAS represents for the public college system in Ontario. It will seek to provide information about the lessons learned and guidance for other interested jurisdictions based on our experiences of needing to innovate in order to remain current, relevant, and at the cutting edge of quality assurance in Canada and on par with similar agencies globally.

The session will be presented by Tim Klassen, Director of the OCQAS and Joy Warkentin, Chair of the OCQAS Management Board.