

# Overview of Provincial and Regional Quality Assurance Mechanisms in Canadian Higher Education

## Introduction

In Canada, constitutional authority for education is vested in provincial and territorial governments. Each province and territory has established laws, policies and procedures that govern the operation of postsecondary institutions including universities. Historically, Canada has had a public system of higher education, and public institutions continue to be by far the main providers of university education. In some provinces, separate legislation and mechanisms have been established to govern the operations of private and out-of-province universities and colleges.

Canada does not have a system of institutional accreditation. Canadian universities derive their authority from provincial legislation. Historically, the appropriate provincial charter plus membership in the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada have stood in lieu of institutional accreditation in higher education. In addition, as a result of their longstanding commitment to work within a common framework of standards across provincial jurisdictions, Canadian universities have a shared understanding of the value of each other's credentials.

**Legislation.** In each of Canada's ten provinces and three territories, legislation is used to some degree by governments to establish, govern, recognize and ensure the quality of postsecondary education. Under specific legislation, programs and their standards may be established by government or require government approval.

**Internal and External Review.** Each Canadian university is autonomous in academic matters, and robust institutional quality assurance policies and processes are the foundation of the Canadian higher education quality assurance regime. The institutions use self-assessment methods to conduct reviews of the quality of the programs they offer. These reviews usually include external academic expertise. In some jurisdictions, the results of institutional reviews may be considered in determining eligibility for public funding.

Institutional policies may stand alone, or they may operate in an environment which includes another level of institutional quality assurance, for example the policies and processes that provide a second line of quality assurance in the higher education systems in the provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island. These provincial or regional processes may be self-regulatory (as is the case of Ontario) or may be a joint activity involving both the

institutions through their provincial or regional association and the provincial government (as is the case in Quebec and in the Maritime provinces of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island). These processes may involve an assurance that the universities' own quality assurance processes are appropriate and meet an agreed upon standard, or they may entail a review of programs themselves. In the case of new programs, the provincial or regional process may assess the program proposal. In some provinces or regions, the universities have met criteria for membership in provincial or regional associations of universities.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada is not an accrediting body. It represents public and private not-for-profit universities and university-degree-level colleges that meet the criteria for admission to Institutional Membership. Among these criteria, a member institution must: be degree-granting through legislative authority; have as its primary mission university-level education; be committed to research, scholarship and academic inquiry; have an appropriate governance structure including academic decision making vested in academic staff; and satisfy the AUCC Board of Directors and membership, after receiving a report by a Visiting Committee, that it is providing education of university standard. The full text of the criteria is available on the Association's Web site ([http://www.aucc.ca/about\\_us/membership/membership\\_e.html](http://www.aucc.ca/about_us/membership/membership_e.html)).

**Accreditation of Professional Programs.** Some university programs are subject to accreditation by professional regulatory bodies (for example, in the fields of nursing, architecture and engineering) in addition to the quality assurance processes of the institution.

This document briefly describes the provincial and regional quality assurance processes. It does not discuss the quality assurance processes of individual universities; this information is available elsewhere on this Web site [http://www.aucc.ca/qa/pol\\_pract/index\\_e.html](http://www.aucc.ca/qa/pol_pract/index_e.html). The document also notes the postsecondary education activities of Canada's three territories. For each province and territory, the appropriate Web site is identified for further information.

## **British Columbia**

### ***Public and Private Universities***

The Province of British Columbia has appointed a Degree Quality Assessment Board and established criteria to be applied when a private institution or an out-of-province public institution applies for consent to provide degree programs or use the word "university" in the province. The board also recommends to the Minister of Advanced Education the policies, criteria and guidelines that will apply for the purposes of giving or refusing consent, or for attaching terms and conditions to consent.

Using the same criteria, the Degree Quality Assessment Board also conducts quality assessment reviews of new degree programs proposed by the province's public

institutions. A British Columbia public institution with a proven track record (a 10-year history enrolling students in programs at a particular degree level) and appropriate governance mechanisms may apply for “exempt status” at a specific degree level. When an institution has been granted exempt status at that degree level, proposals submitted for new degree programs at the same level go directly to the minister for approval following a 30-day Notice of Intent period during which the proposal is posted on the ministry’s web site. The Degree Quality Assessment Board will not review the proposal unless the minister has concerns about it and refers it to the board.

Details: <http://www.aved.gov.bc.ca/degree-authorization/>.

## **Alberta**

### ***Public and Private Universities and Degree-Granting Colleges***

The *Post-secondary Learning Act, 2003*, replaces several discrete acts including the *Universities Act*.

Among other things, the act establishes the Campus Alberta Quality Council “to facilitate the development and expansion of degree-granting opportunities”. The council reviews proposals from both public and private institutions wishing to offer new degree-level programs. The institution must show a need for additional degree opportunities and demonstrate that its proposed program meets quality standards. The council will make recommendations to the Minister of Learning based on an organizational review of the institution and a review of the proposed degree program.

The Campus Alberta Quality Council may consider:

- (a) the identified and demonstrated need for the program
- (b) the capacity of the post-secondary institution to deliver and sustain a high quality program
- (c) the impact of the program on the ability of the post-secondary institution to fulfill its approved mandate
- (d) course and program transferability and portability within and outside the Alberta post-secondary system, and
- (e) integration of the program within the existing array of similar programs and services across the post-secondary system.

### ***Performance Awards***

A performance envelope was implemented by Alberta Learning in 1997 to “recognize and reward the performance of post-secondary institutions and to encourage and support

continuous improvement”. In 2004, the province awarded \$10 million to 24 postsecondary institutions in recognition of outstanding performance. A portion of the funding (\$1,002,959) was awarded to the province’s universities from the Research Allocation “for outstanding performance in research, in the areas of achievement and improvement, community and industry support, and research enterprise relative to their peer institutions across the country”. Payments were also made to the universities and university colleges from the Learning Allocation (\$4,766,443).

Details: <http://www.caqc.gov.ab.ca/>

## **Saskatchewan**

### ***Public Universities***

The province’s two universities, the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina, and their affiliated and federated colleges, use internal processes to ensure the quality of their academic offerings. In addition, the universities are members of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan Universities Program Review Audit Council. Composed of six universities, the Council monitors the frequency, quality, consequences and efficacy of the institutions’ academic program reviews; serves as a source of input and advice for member institutions; and disseminates the most current and informed thinking about and best practices in program review. Details at: [www.prairieuniversities.ca](http://www.prairieuniversities.ca)

An accountability framework, adopted across government, requires each provincial government department to develop a set of goals, objectives, actions and performance measures. Saskatchewan Learning has established a steering committee, including representatives from the province’s public universities and colleges, to oversee development of a learning sector strategic performance plan. The 2004-05 sector-wide (all levels of education plus the provincial library) plan includes four goals:

- Learners succeed
- A seamless continuum of formal and informal learning opportunities
- Inclusiveness
- Social and economic development

Specific objectives are outlined under each goal, and the actions to be taken to achieve the goals and objectives are established. A set of performance measures to assess progress in achieving these goals is under development. The first annual report using these performance measures will be published in the Department of Learning’s 2004-05 annual report.

A recent report on university revitalization includes information on the accomplishments of the province’s two public universities around quality including the processes implemented by each institution to: review program quality; evaluate programs against external accreditation standards; and review faculty performance.

Details: <http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/>

### ***Private Universities***

The Province of Saskatchewan restricts the power to grant degrees, except in theology, to the two provincial universities, the University of Saskatchewan and the University of Regina.

## **Manitoba**

### ***Public Universities***

Proposals for new and significantly changed undergraduate and graduate programs are submitted to the Council on Post-Secondary Education which reviews them for quality, need, organization and finances.

There is no provincial process to evaluate continuing programs, although the Council on Post-Secondary Education monitors quality via graduate satisfaction surveys and student surveys undertaken every five years.

Details: <http://www.copse.mb.ca/index.htm>

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Details at: [www.prairieuniversities.ca](http://www.prairieuniversities.ca)

### ***Private Universities***

Some private institutions grant degrees by act of the provincial legislative assembly.

## **Ontario**

### ***Public Universities***

#### ***1. Undergraduate Program Review Audits: current and new programs***

The Council of Ontario Universities has established guidelines for the regular audit of Ontario universities' policies and procedures for the conduct of periodic quality reviews of undergraduate programs. Each university is required to establish a cycle of internal reviews that accords with provincial guidelines. These processes are subject to audit on a seven-year cycle.

The same guidelines also apply to the audit of policies and procedures used by the universities for the introduction of new undergraduate programs.

Authority for the organization and management of the audits is vested in the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV), an affiliate of the Council of Ontario Universities. The detailed oversight of the audit process is devolved to a committee of OCAV, the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC).

The audits are intended to provide institutions with objective advice on how they might improve their own quality review processes, and to assure the government and the citizens of Ontario that undergraduate program quality is being maintained and enhanced.

The audits are conducted independently by three auditors appointed by UPRAC. These are senior university professors, mostly retired, who have had major administrative responsibility in their institutions and have demonstrated strong interest in the development and operation of undergraduate programs.

The first audits were conducted in 1997. With two or three audits undertaken each year, the review processes of all Ontario universities are audited over the course of seven years. The first cycle of reviews was completed in 2003. The second cycle will commence in the fall of 2004.

The UPRAC audit guidelines specify the two tests that the auditors must apply. First, the auditors are mandated to examine the conformity of the institution's review process to the model framework for program reviews laid down in the guidelines. Then they must consider how well institutional procedures and practices conform to the institution's own review policy. The guidelines state that an institutional review must include a thorough and analytical self-evaluation by the program's faculty on the strengths and weaknesses of their program, and that students must participate in this self-study. The institutional review must also require an assessment of the program by at least one external consultant, and an appraisal by faculty who are not from the program under review. The review must conclude with an action plan to deal with the recommendations arising from it, and a summary report must be presented to the institution's senate and board of governors.

The audit of an institutional process for the implementation of new programs follows an analogous route.

An audit entails a detailed review and assessment of the written documentation provided by the university followed by a site visit and a written report. Besides providing commentary, the auditors make recommendations and suggestions designed to improve the processes that institutions have put in place for the review of their undergraduate programs. Copies of the auditors' reports are sent to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities and to all other Ontario universities.

## ***2. Graduate Studies: current and new programs***

The Ontario Council on Graduate Studies, an affiliate of the Council of Ontario Universities, has been engaged in quality assurance in graduate education and research

across Ontario since 1963. In that year, OCGS began the review of proposed programs; this responsibility was extended to the review of existing programs in 1981. OCGS conducts quality reviews of new master's and PhD programs proposed by the province's universities. The council reviews existing programs on a seven-year cycle.

While not mandated by government, the OCGS appraisal process has come to be recognized by the provincial government as an important quality assurance mechanism on which government decisions are based. In order for any graduate program to receive provincial funding it must have OCGS approval.

Details:

UPRAC: <http://www.cou.on.ca/bin/affiliates/associations/upracmain.cfm>

OCGS: <http://ocgs.cou.on.ca/>

### ***Private and Out-of-Province Universities***

The *Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act, 2000* replaced the *Degree Granting Act, 1983*. Under the latter, only the 17 provincially established and assisted universities were authorized to offer university education.

The new act provides for the establishment of private not-for-profit and for-profit universities, and extends applied undergraduate degree granting powers to the province's colleges of applied arts and technology (CAATs).

The legislation established the Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board which reviews applications from private universities and from CAATs, and advises the minister.

PEQAB has prepared separate and detailed handbooks for the guidance of the process of receiving applications either from institutions seeking to operate as private providers of baccalaureate degrees, or from community colleges seeking to offer applied degrees. The processes for the assessment of such applications as set out in the handbooks are based on best practices in other jurisdictions.

Details: <http://www.peqab.edu.gov.on.ca/>

### ***Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario***

In 2006, the Province of Ontario established the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario to provide advice to the Minister of Training, Colleges and Universities on improving:

- the quality of education provided in the sector
- access to postsecondary education, and
- accountability of postsecondary education institutions.

The council was recommended by the Honourable Bob Rae, former Premier of Ontario, in his 2005 report to the provincial government on the province's postsecondary education system entitled *Ontario: A Leader in Learning*.

Details: <http://www.heqco.ca>

## Quebec

### *Public Universities*

#### **1. *Quality Assessment of New and Modified Programs***

Quebec's universities have vested the Conference of Rectors and Principals of Quebec Universities (CREPUQ) with responsibility for assessing the quality of proposed new programs leading to undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate degrees. The programs are assessed differently according to whether they are entirely new, or programs that a university has already demonstrated some capacity to offer.

The Commission d'évaluation des projets de programmes [proposed programs assessment commission], established in 1988, is composed of eight members appointed for three-year terms by CREPUQ's Comité des affaires académiques [academic affairs committee]. The assessment procedure for new programs entails consultations with outside experts who produce reports based on institutional site visits. On the basis of these reports and its deliberations, the commission reaches its decision and forwards it to the university. The commission conducts its deliberations in an entirely autonomous manner, and its decisions are final.

The commission's assessment is part of the file that the university submits to the Ministry of Education when applying for funding for its new program.

The commission assesses about twenty program proposals a year.

#### **2. *Audit of Existing Programs***

In 1991, CREPUQ adopted a framework policy for the periodic assessment of existing university programs. This initiative flowed from a study of institutional policies and practices in effect at that time. The study showed that these policies differed from institution to institution, as did each institution's acquired experience and expertise in the area of assessment. As a result of the study, each degree-granting institution in Quebec is required to assess the quality and relevance of all of its degree programs, on a cycle that cannot exceed ten years. The assessment process must include: (1) a departmental review conducted by the program's professors and students; (2) an outside review conducted by experts from other universities in Quebec, other Canadian provinces or other countries; and (3) a report prepared by a peer-review committee that recommends actions to be taken by the appropriate institutional authorities.

To support its policy, CREPUQ formed the Commission de vérification de l'évaluation des programmes [program assessment audit commission]. The commission's role is to verify the conformity of institutional policies and practices with the established goals, criteria and procedures of the assessment process. The timetable for the commission's work is established in consultation with each institution. Where necessary, the commission will recommend that an institution take steps to improve its assessment process.

The commission is autonomous. The recommendations it makes are addressed to the institution concerned and are not subject to the approval of CREPUQ. The commission's audit reports are made public, and can be accessed on the CREPUQ Web site.

*Details:* [http://www.crepuq.qc.ca/rubrique.php3?id\\_rubrique=54](http://www.crepuq.qc.ca/rubrique.php3?id_rubrique=54)

### ***Private and Out-of-Province Universities***

N/A

## **Maritime Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island)**

### ***Public Universities***

The mandate of the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission has application in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island. The statute establishing the commission provides it with responsibility for: a) reviewing all new program and program modification proposals; and b) monitoring the institutions' quality assurance mechanisms. MPHEC is directly accountable to the Council of Maritime Premiers.

Implementation of the commission's Policy on Quality Assurance began in 2000. It includes two tools. The first is the review of new academic programs prior to their implementation. The process is intended to improve the quality of academic programs and ultimately to assure potential students, employers, and the public at large that the programs in which students are enrolled in and from which they graduate meet agreed-upon standards of quality (for example, appropriate program structure, human and financial resources, adequacy of infrastructure).

Institutions are required to submit proposals for new or modified programs to the commission for approval prior to implementation. The vast majority of program proposals are reviewed by staff and granted approval if they meet agreed-upon criteria. If a proposal does not meet the criteria for approval and/or major issues are identified, it is forwarded to the Academic Advisory Committee, a joint committee of the Association of Atlantic Universities and the MPHEC, for an in-depth assessment.

The second tool is a monitoring process which was designed, in consultation with stakeholder groups, to ascertain that the procedures used by institutions to assess the quality of existing programs are performing adequately as quality control and quality

improvement mechanisms. The joint AAU-MPHEC Quality Assurance Monitoring Committee carries out the monitoring function on behalf of MPHEC. It functions as a peer review committee whose purpose is to advise and assist the MPHEC in ensuring continuous improvement in the quality of academic programs and teaching. A key outcome of the process is the provision of assistance and advice to institutions on ways to enhance their quality assurance policies and procedures. Criteria have been established for the assessment of institutional quality assurance procedures.

The AAU-MPHEC Quality Assurance Monitoring Committee:

- monitors the outcomes of institutional quality assessment policies and procedures, within the parameters established by the MPHEC;
- suggests relevant research/publications to the MPHEC and assists in their preparation, as they relate to quality assurance;
- examines issues or carries out projects as the MPHEC deems necessary and appropriate, as they relate to quality assurance.

The objectives of the monitoring function are:

- to ascertain that the procedures used by institutions to assess the quality of existing programs, and other functions as appropriate, are performing adequately as quality control and quality improvement mechanisms;
- to provide answers to the following questions: how well is the institution achieving what it set out to accomplish in its quality assurance policy?; is it doing what it should be doing in the area of quality assurance?
- to review institutional policies and practices with a view to providing assistance and advice to institutions.

The AAU-MPHEC Quality Assurance Monitoring Committee is expected to conduct two to three reviews per year.

Details: <http://www.mphec.ca/>

## **Nova Scotia**

The Nova Scotia Advisory Board on Colleges and Universities was established by order-in-council in 2000 and replaced the body previously known as the Nova Scotia Council on Higher Education. Among the advisory board's responsibilities are:

- to review new regional program proposals by Nova Scotia universities and, in consultation with the MPHEC, to recommend to the minister of education the approval or disapproval of public funding;

- to recommend discontinuance of funding for regional programs that the advisory board and the MPHEC determine are no longer necessary to meet the established goals of university education in the province.

All universities in Nova Scotia must be members of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada.

### ***Private and Out-of-Province Universities***

- New Brunswick

In 2001, the New Brunswick legislature enacted the *Degree Granting Act* to regulate the delivery process and the quality of degrees offered by private institutions. Before adoption of this legislation, there were no legal restrictions on, or standards for, the offer of degrees by private institutions. Wanting to preserve the quality of its university education, while protecting students and existing institutions alike, the government of New Brunswick established a designation process for all private degree programs.

University establishments created by an act of the legislature before adoption of the *Degree Granting Act* are not subject to the act. These institutions are the four public universities (University of New Brunswick, Université de Moncton, Mount Allison University and St. Thomas University), and three private institutions (St. Stephen's University, the Atlantic Baptist University and Bethany Bible College).

The authorization of private institutions to offer degrees is called "designation". The Lieutenant Governor in Council officially sanctions all designations.

Once a private institution's business plan has been approved, the applicant institution must recommend the name of several academic quality assessment auditors to the Post-Secondary Affairs Branch of the Department of Education. The Minister of Education will select one of the recommended auditors. Once the minister has selected an auditor, the applicant will be asked to proceed to the academic quality assessment audit in conformity with the regulations of the *Degree Granting Act*. Under the act, the minister may ask the Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission to perform the academic quality assessment audit.

After completion of the academic quality assessment audit, the applicant must submit a copy of the audit report to the government, along with the designation application form and a fee payable to the province.

The formal approval process is fundamentally an internal process of government. The Post-Secondary Affairs Branch will review the audit report, verify the legal status of the applicant and make a formal recommendation to the minister. If the project receives ministerial approval, it will be submitted for formal sanction and signature by the Lieutenant Governor. A letter from the Minister of Education, accompanied by a

designation certificate bearing the minister's signature, will confirm the designation. The applicant may start operating as a degree-granting institution from that point on. Designations are renewable every five years.

- Nova Scotia

N/A.

- Prince Edward Island

N/A. The *University Act* establishes Prince Edward Island's only university and protects the university's credentials by stating that no organization other than the University of Prince Edward Island may use the term "university".

## **Newfoundland and Labrador**

### ***Public Universities***

The Province of Newfoundland and Labrador has a single university. The quality of Memorial University's programs is addressed through an internal process of self-study and review. Each department of the university conducts its own program reviews and prepares reports for a review committee composed of two members external to the university and two university members external to the department. The committee reviews the reports and prepares responses that are used by the department in its strategic planning process. These quality assurance procedures are conducted every seven years.

### ***Private and Out-of-Province Universities***

N/A. The *Memorial University Act* establishes Newfoundland and Labrador's only university. The term "university" is protected by legislation, and there are no other public, or private universities in the province.

## **Northwest Territories**

### ***Public Universities***

The only public postsecondary institution in the Northwest Territories is a community college. Aurora College is responsible for delivering adult and postsecondary programs, including university-level programs and the granting of certificates, diplomas and prescribed university degrees. The minister is responsible for establishing programs and courses. The board of Aurora College is responsible for recommending priorities for programs and courses to the minister. Aurora College is not affiliated with any Canadian university. However, it does have a number of program-specific collaboration and articulation agreements and memoranda of understanding with several universities. Aurora College has agreements with universities whereby the first two years of a university program can be taken at the college and credited by the university. Program standards are identified in the agreements and maintained through the review process at each institution.

***Private and Out-of-Territories Universities***

N/A.

**Yukon**

***Public Universities***

The *College Act* establishes the only postsecondary institution in the Yukon, a community college. Yukon College is responsible for providing certificate, diploma and degree programming. Yukon College is not formally affiliated with any university. In a number of articulations with universities in British Columbia, the first two years of university programs can be taken at the college and credited by the universities.

***Private and Out-of-Province Universities***

N/A.

**Nunavut**

***Public Universities***

The *Public Colleges Act* establishes the only postsecondary institution in Nunavut. Nunavut Arctic College is a public community college responsible for delivering adult and postsecondary programs, including university-level programs through agreement with particular universities and the granting of certificates and diplomas. The act establishes a board of governors for the college which is accountable to the minister and responsible for recommending to the minister priorities for programs and courses, establishing admission standards, and making bylaws with respect to academic standards.

***Private and Out-of-Territory Universities***

N/A.