Sub-theme 3: A quality culture – embedding QA into the life of an institution

Creating and Sustaining a Quality Culture at York University

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Abstract

In the context of a QA regime incorporating external assessment at the graduate level,
external audit at the undergraduate level and internal self-assessment at both levels, York
University has gone beyond mere compliance with the requirements of that regime to
internalize and expand the quality agenda. With a focus on the quality of student learning
and of the student learning experience, York has developed a program approval and
review process that reflects its own institutional ethos, history, structure and objectives,
and addresses issues that include but go beyond the requirements of external QA
agencies. It has created structures, processes and projects that engage a wide variety of
members of the university community – faculty, staff and students – in the identification
and enhancement of quality issues. Examples from the undergraduate program review,
Retention Council and Research at York experiences will illustrate the quality initiatives
that have been pursued, and the impact on quality that has resulted.

The QA Context

The province of Ontario contains over one-third of the universities, and over one-third of
the university students, in Canada. The scale and critical mass of publicly-assisted higher
education institutions has made it possible to create a quality assurance (QA) regime that
has operated successfully for many years. The QA regime incorporates external
assessment at the graduate level, external audit at the undergraduate level, and
institutional self-assessment at both levels. This QA regime has established a context
within which a quality culture has been created and sustained at York University – the
third largest university in Canada, and second largest in Ontario.

External QA began in Ontario in 1965. The province was faced in the 1960's with the
dramatic expansion of the university-age population (the baby boom generation), the
creation of several new universities (including York) to respond to the demand for higher
education by that growing population, and the desire of those new universities to offer
programs at the graduate as well as the undergraduate level. The Ontario universities
responded in an exercise of voluntary collective self-regulation, by creating the Ontario

Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) to operate an independent program-level QA process. Since 1965 all the universities of Ontario – new and old alike – are bound not to offer any new master's or doctoral program unless and until it has been appraised as of good quality and approved to commence by OCGS. Though this QA process is not created, operated or administered by the government, it is recognized and accepted by them. An application by one of the publicly-assisted universities for government operating funding for a new graduate program cannot be submitted until the OCGS appraisal process is completed, and as a demonstration of the quality of the program, the OCGS approval to commence must be submitted as part of the application for funding.

In 1983 the graduate program appraisal process was extended to the periodic appraisal of existing master's and doctoral programs. All programs in the same discipline category are appraised in the same year of a seven-year cycle, and can only continue to be offered if they are appraised as of good quality and approved to continue for a further seven years (or conditionally approved while specified deficiencies are remedied within a short period of time not to exceed three years). The purpose of the periodic appraisal cycle is not to rank or explicitly compare programs, but to ensure that the members of the OCGS Appraisal Committee, who are appointed to conduct the appraisals by OCGS on nomination from the universities, are conscious of the norms, practices and conditions of the various disciplines, so as to guard against misperceptions and inappropriate expectations. The periodic appraisal process is now concluding its 4th cycle, so every graduate program in the province has been successfully appraised at least once, and up to five times (if it began after 1965, but before 1983).

The standards, procedures and data requirements for graduate program appraisals are available at http://ocgs.cou.on.ca/_bin/home/byLaws.cfm All Ontario universities have become accustomed to compile, and in their self-studies to analyze, the various data required by the OCGS appraisal process.

There is ultimately a summative element to OCGS appraisal, since a proposed new program that does not satisfy the standards of good quality may not be implemented, and an existing program that fails to meet those standards (or at least to be conditionally approved pending the prompt remedy of deficiencies such that it meets the standards) must cease admitting students. Nevertheless, the principal effect of the appraisal process is formative, focussing the attention of programs and institutions that have previously been found to be of good quality and internalized the OCGS standards on ways to become even better, and providing feedback and questions from external reviewers and the Appraisal Committee aimed at quality improvement.

Rising pressures for public accountability in the 1990's led the Ontario universities to institute a QA process at the undergraduate level as well. In contrast to the graduate program appraisal process, which has involved direct external assessment of the quality of programs, the undergraduate QA process involves an academic audit. Though several Ontario universities, including York, had been reviewing the quality of their undergraduate programs for many years, all universities agreed to conduct the approval of new undergraduate programs and the quality review of existing undergraduate

programs in keeping with a set of standards and procedures (the Guidelines) approved by the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV). In 1997 a process of external audit of the approval and review of undergraduate programs was begun, and once every seven years each university is audited by OCAV's Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC) to determine whether its institutional policies and procedures for undergraduate program approval and review comply with the province-wide Guidelines, and whether its practices in actual program approvals and reviews comply with its own policies as well as with the Guidelines. The UPRAC Guidelines are available at http://www.cou.on.ca/_bin/affiliates/associations/upracmain.cfm

The audit is concerned with process rather than direct assessment of academic quality. It does not assess the quality of those programs selected for the audit – that review was previously conducted by the university. Its contribution to public accountability rests upon its demonstration that the quality of every undergraduate program in the university is regularly reviewed according to transparent and sound procedures and standards that are verified by external audit. Its contribution to quality improvement rests upon the cyclical reviews of each individual program, and upon the logic that an improvement in quality assurance processes and attention of program members to quality issues will lead to improved academic outcomes.[1] The second cycle of audits is underway, and several universities, including York, have been audited a second time, which allows for consideration of compliance with the recommendations of the first audit, as well as of changes to comply with amendments to the Guidelines and general institutional improvements.

Thus for many years faculty and staff at York University have been accustomed to compilation of the data and engagement in program self-study mandated by the graduate or undergraduate level QA processes. At a university the size of York, with almost 50,000 students, several graduate and undergraduate programs are undergoing OCGS appraisal or an undergraduate program review (UPR) each year. But the university has worked to make quality an internal preoccupation, and not just a matter of satisfying one external authority or another.

York's Response

York has not simply complied with the OCGS and UPRAC processes, but has built substantial internal processes that take ownership of the quality agenda, and work for continuous improvement of academic programs and enhancement of the quality of student learning.

Graduate appraisals are conducted under the authority of the Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, who notifies programs of their upcoming place in the seven year cycle, provides them with centrally-collected data for use in the self-study and preparation of the appraisal brief, and reviews, approves and then submits the appraisal brief to OCGS. In the case of UPRs and approval of proposed new undergraduate programs, it is an

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[1] David D. Dill, "Designing Academic Audit: lessons learned in Europe and Asia" Quality in Higher Education Volume 6 number 3 November 2000, p. 203

associate vice-president academic (AVPA) who manages and gives support to the process. In both cases both the OCGS and UPRAC requirements and the York University policies necessitate not just a description of stipulated data, but a reflective analysis of the standards and criteria of good quality, and of the opportunities for quality improvement.

York requires every undergraduate program to undergo a UPR on an eight-year cycle. The criteria and procedures for those UPRs have been refined over time to comply with amendments to the UPRAC Guidelines, and also to address other quality issues that have arisen within the university, in ways that are compatible with the institutional culture. An example of indigenously developed quality issues is York's general education requirement, which ensures that every undergraduate student experiences breadth, interdisciplinarity and the development of critical skills regardless of their program of study. Every new program proposal and every UPR must articulate learning objectives. More recently every program proposal and every program undergoing a UPR must express university undergraduate degree level expectations (UUDLES) as expected learning outcomes, and how they will be demonstrated by every student – e.g. in which courses and assignments, and by what assessment criteria. The requirement for UUDLES has called upon all members of the York community to reflect upon what is expected of all recipients of a York degree, what is common to all recipients of a particular degree (e.g. BA versus BSc or BFA), what is expected of graduates in a particular program (e.g. Sociology versus Philosophy), and even what is expected upon completion of an individual course within that program. As all within the QA community know, adoption of a mindset asking questions about student learning outcomes and degree level standards among grassroots faculty members is the most important factor in incorporating these issues into an effective QA process. York's process does not leave it to chance whether this mindset will be present in every program, or leave continuous improvement to the vagaries of local cultures in different Faculties. At York, where different Faculties with distinct missions sometimes offer similar or cognate degree programs that are to be reviewed in the same year by the same set of reviewers (consultants), it is important that program approval and review be undertaken seriously, consistently and with sensitivity to student learning and quality improvement. York has devoted significant human, financial and policy resources to require and support the development of that shared mindset and foster the consciousness of the centrality of quality issues on the university's agenda and their applicability to every program, and indeed every course, instructor and student, with the overall goal of working to enhance the quality culture.

This can be illustrated by expanding upon the stages through which every UPR proceeds, and the extent of faculty, staff and student participation in the process and the consequences which flow from it.

The process begins with a briefing by the AVPA with those involved in overseeing and undertaking each UPR, such as the chair(s), undergraduate program director, staff and others. In the case of cognate reviews, where different units need to engage in a collective UPR process, all relevant individuals are brought together at the outset. In this briefing, participants are provided with an overview of the requirements and elements necessary for a UPR in the context of the principles of QA in other jurisdictions, the

UPRAC requirements and the university's policy and expectations. They are provided with institutional data concerning their program[2], and are impressed with the importance of thorough self-appraisal rather than defensive or descriptive mechanical compliance. In particular they are reminded (informed) of the requirement to develop and articulate learning objectives and UUDLES as expected learning outcomes. Through the Office of the AVPA and the Centre for the Support of Teaching (CST) faculty are offered many opportunities to develop critical thinking about learning objectives and UUDLES, to understand how they can support and benefit our students' learning and how these processes can lead to continuous quality improvement of the program. Given the complexity of moving to UUDLES, colleagues are informed of the iterative nature of the process of developing UUDLES and that while it is expected and required that all units will provide initial formulations in the upcoming UPR, they are expected to develop them more fully over time. This 'easing in' process allows units to more fully appreciate UUDLES and their benefits without the pressure to produce 'perfect' UUDLES in the first iteration. Additionally, tools are being developed that faculty can use to undertake the development of UUDLES. These include the usefulness of constructive alignment (aligning expected learning outcomes with the curriculum using aids such as curriculum mapping and assessments to determine that students have achieved the expected outcomes) which in turn is expected to lead to further enhancements in quality.

Units engaged in a UPR administer a student questionnaire that assesses student opinions related to curricular content, process and styles of teaching and learning, and student experiences in the program as well as producing demographic data. Each program is able to provide additional questions that drill down to specific issues for inclusion in the self-appraisal. For example, Computer Science wanted student suggestions for improving the Industrial Internship Option, and Education asked whether the special focus of the York University Teacher program on equity and social justice and environmental issues were evident in the host schools. Questionnaire development and analysis is supported by York's Institute for Social Research. These on-line questionnaires are of sufficient interest to students that invariably returns have been at or above a 50% response rate.

York uses the term self-appraisal instead of self-study. The process requires faculty to be thoughtful and analytical in their self-appraisal – they are expected to examine, evaluate and assess all aspects of the program, and to detail the outcomes of that appraisal. Self-appraisal agendas are developed by units that culminate in a retreat with direct input by full and part-time faculty, staff, librarians, teaching assistants and tutorial leaders, and students. The aims of the self-appraisal are to review the vision and mission of the program, and the expected learning outcomes and actual student outcomes, to determine the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and tensions in the program, to develop solutions to identified problems and to develop an agenda of concerns - a series of questions for external consultants. The deans are also highly involved in the UPRs, including development of their own agenda of concerns for the consultants. The AVPA also supplies the consultants with a generic agenda of concerns detailing the various elements

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[2] York has become one of the increasing number of universities using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), and is incorporating NSSE data into OCGS and UPR self-assessments.

that should be reviewed by the consultants to ensure that all the salient elements required by UPRAC of UPRs are fully addressed.

External consultants, who are arm's length experts in the discipline or area, provide constructive and reflective commentary in the form of analysis of the program, its strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations and suggestions for action by the unit to improve program quality, student experience and student satisfaction. In addition, given the complexity of York's Faculty structures and academic approvals processes, a faculty member of high standing familiar with the York University academic processes and cultures and at arm's length to the program under review is selected to accompany the external consultants. In a site visit the consultants meet with all stakeholders, including selected students and students present in one or more large classes. The consultants' joint report is provided to all members of the unit undergoing the UPR and to the dean.

The unit is required to respond to all of the consultants' recommendations, and typically addresses suggestions made by the consultants as well. The dean considers both the consultants' report and the program response, and provides a formal decanal response. Following a summary by the AVPA of the review, the consultants' recommendations, the disposition of the unit to those recommendations and the decanal response, the unit chair and the dean meet with the Senate Committee on Curriculum and Academic standards to review the UPR documentation, to determine the outcomes and what the unit plans to undertake in response to the UPR. These outcomes are communicated to Senate and to the Board of Governors to ensure transparency in the UPR process.

While the UPR process is formative rather than summative, it culminates in the identification of outcomes and commitment to action. Many of the consequences are internal to the program, such as curricular restructuring. However deficiencies can be remedied, and substantial resource or structural consequences can also result from the UPR process, even if they are not its direct requirement. For example, a recent UPR resulted in consultants recommending that a longstanding program popular with many students but lacking a unified vision undergo a major reorganization or, alternatively, possibly closing. While the unit's response was that they could find no common new vision for the program, but were satisfied with the status quo, the dean accepted the consultants' recommendation to form a Faculty task force to review the program. The task force recommended closure of the program. The dean took that advice and as a result the program closed with the blessing of the majority of faculty in the unit, Faculty Council and Senate.

In addition to the OCGS and UPR processes themselves, the university has invested significantly in other structures to internalize the improvement of quality of teaching and learning. Mention has been made above of the role of the CST, which was established to elevate the teaching skills of instructors, to help programs and individual instructors to recognize how learning objectives and UUDLES can benefit student learning, and to develop and incorporate them into the design and operation of the program and its courses. The CST with the AVPA and others has offered workshops on learning objectives and learning outcomes, and on UUDLES. It has provided advice to instructors

and programs on course and program design to incorporate these required elements. It has been a principal player in helping to translate what might otherwise be simply QA jargon adhered to in a defensive or formalistic manner, into the teaching life of an increasing number of instructors at the university, consciously building learning objectives and learning outcomes, and UUDLES, explicitly into their courses. The CST also offers programs to improve the teaching skills of graduate student teaching assistants, and thereby to improve the quality of the undergraduate learning experience, as well as to improve the preparation of those graduate students for future university teaching careers.

The large and growing number of instructors who have participated in CST workshops, and the growing sophistication with which learning objectives and UUDLES are being articulated in program self-appraisals are testimony to the fact that the university culture is changing. So too is a marked diminution in resistance to UPRs with a concomitant increase in engagement by faculty, and the fact that some faculty who might be described as early resisters have become more supportive or, indeed, champions of UUDLES and the opportunities they afford programs and students - this is readily documented with several colleagues who have individually become prime supporters and developers of overarching expected learning outcomes for degree types (e.g. BA, BSc degrees) that extend beyond the UPRAC requirements for UUDLES. Concern with the quality of student learning is widespread and spreading.

At York University, embedding quality of student learning into the life of the institution involves concerted efforts by multiple players both inside and outside the classroom. Periodic graduate and undergraduate program appraisals and the development of degree level expectations can be conscientiously implemented and they can be productive, but for many faculty members and non-teaching staff, these activities can potentially be perceived as "top down" initiatives, focused on the individual program or unit. In contrast, the efforts to embed a culture of quality involve initiatives that extend beyond the single unit. At York, there have been several projects through which faculty and staff work together to build a university-wide culture that supports quality learning and higher levels of student engagement. A multi-faceted approach is necessary to meet the needs of our students, the majority of whom live at home, have lengthy commutes to campus, and have part time jobs during the academic year.

One such project is the Retention Council, launched in 2007. The sixty-member Council includes middle and upper level administrators, college masters, academic advisers, librarians, non-teaching staff, and students. This organisational structure acknowledges the underlying assumption that it is the responsibility of everyone to create and sustain a culture of quality. The mission of the Retention Council is to create and sustain avenues for communication and collaboration; to ensure that program assessment occurs in student success initiatives; to achieve excellence in student experience and success as measured by student retention, academic achievement, and a statement of satisfactory experience at York University; and to develop and support initiatives designed to improve the educational experience of York students from the end of Orientation through to Convocation. Another university structure, the Recruitment Council, attends to student

needs prior to their arrival at York, culminating with Orientation. The Retention Council's philosophy is that a student's optimal experience extends beyond the curricular to include co-curricular and extra-curricular activities as well as the development of life skills and leadership skills. The Retention Council works from the bottom up as well as from the top down: acknowledging successful initiatives; providing regular opportunities for interaction between faculty members, non-teaching staff, and students; and encouraging the development and sharing of new concepts and approaches.

The Council has six sub-committees: advising; year-to-year transition; faculty participation (which works closely with the CST), student engagement, data and resources; and peer mentoring. In this paper, we will discuss the work undertaken by three of these committees toward embedding a pan-university quality culture: peer mentoring, year-to-year transition, and advising.

The peer mentoring sub-committee has a mandate to examine and extend successful experiences with upper year students mentoring new students. A proven successful local initiative that provides a model for others is the Fine Arts Peer Mentoring Program, created in 2006, prior to the formal establishment of the Retention Council, designed to assist and support first year students to maximize their academic and social experience. All first year students face challenges for many reasons, both academic and personal, but students in the fine arts experience unique stressors, including performance and competition anxiety as well as significant time management issues. Matching mentees with successful upper year students (mentors) in their own artistic disciplines enables them to receive peer guidance from someone who has successfully managed the transition into university. During the academic year, mentors are expected to meet one-on-one with their mentee(s) for at least one hour per week, to attend mentor/mentee forums and "coffee house" sessions, and to volunteer two hours per week in the Peer Advising Centre. Here, they work with other mentors advising Fine Arts students on a drop-in basis, they answer the help line, they respond to email inquiries, and they contribute to the mentor/mentee blog.

A 2007-08 analysis comparing the mean grade point average of first year students who had a mentor with the mean grade point average of first year students who did not have a mentor shows that students who had a mentor performed better academically, earning GPAs approximately one grade point higher, than students who were not in the mentoring program.

Table 1: Impact of Peer Mentoring on GPA

Mentee	N Obs	Variable	Mean	Pr > |t|
No	532	Overall gpa	5.35	<.0001
		Major gpa	5.63	<.0001
Yes	144	Overall gpa	6.17	<.0001
		Major gpa	6.37	<.0001

Note: In the York scale, 5 = C+; 6 = B; 7 = B+.

Additionally, the first-year Fine Arts students who participated in the peer mentoring program responded more positively than their Fine Arts colleagues and other first year York University students on a number of NSSE questions.

Table 2: Selected NSSE Results

NSSE Question	Fine Arts with mentor n = 46	Fine Arts no mentor n = 126	other 1st years n = 1742
often asked questions in class	32.7%	25.6%	23.7%
very often worked with classmates outside class	30.0%	27.6%	11.5%
often discussed ideas from class with others outside class	50.0%	33.3%	31.9%
very often had conversations with students very different from themselves	35.6%	31.5%	26.4%
York very much helped them to think critically and analytically	48.9%	45.2%	39.0%
York very much helped them to develop personal values and ethics	31.0%	25.9%	20.7%

Clearly, peer mentoring works. It has a demonstrable positive impact on student learning and student engagement.

Each Retention Council sub-committee sets its own goals for the year. The primary project completed by the year-to-year transition sub-committee in 2007/08 was the launching of the Navig8 web site, http://www.yorku.ca/web/navig8/index.html The Navig8 site presents need-to-know information in one convenient e-place and provides online tools to help students manage the process and avoid much of the stress that accompanies the move from year to year. Information available on the Navig8 site includes: a rolling calendar of York's academic deadlines; video clips of current students sharing their tips for success; links to information about minimizing exam stress and understanding grade reports; and a list of high-priority tasks students can complete to ensure that their next academic year begins on track. Students also have the option to subscribe to receive regular e-mail or text message reminders about important dates. In

addition to details on academic advising, housing, and money matters, Navig8 reminds students of the importance of extending their student experience beyond the classroom by including information on opportunities for engagement in student life through campus clubs and organizations.

In 2007/08, the advising sub-committee began the process of examining current multiple and often disconnected advising practices at York University. In February 2008, all front-line advisers at York were invited to participate in a full-day forum where the student experience of advising was explored. Sessions included advising from the student perspective, the examination of student learning styles, and the professional development of the advisers' listening skills. For the first time, advisers from across the university were granted the opportunity to engage with one another and to share their ideas, experiences, and concerns around student advising.

In 2008/09, the advising sub-committee embarked on an extended investigation of the current advising structure at York University. The ultimate goal is to identify and clarify the various advising pathways that are available to students. The first step in this process took place at the fall 2008 Retention Council meeting. Faculty and staff from different areas met in groups to discuss the following questions: What kind(s) of advising do you do (i.e., are you a college adviser, faculty member, advising centre adviser, etc)? What are the 3 most frequent questions or concerns that students present to you? Where do you see your advising role fitting within the context of the student's overall experience at York? What advising model do you think would best support our students' needs? The data from that meeting confirmed the complexity of advising in a large institution and the sub-committee continues its work on this project. There were two dominant responses: the importance of providing students with consistently accurate information and the desirability of developing a more effective referral process. The student's first stop should be the last or second last stop in their quest for information.

Another initiative, this one positioned outside the purview of the Retention Council, is the Research at York (RAY) program. The York University Academic Plan (2005-10) positions "enhancement of the research culture at York" as a primary objective. Historically, the role played by graduate students in research at York has been more clearly defined than the role played by undergraduates. Concurrent with the emphasis placed on research, the current UAP also speaks to enhancement of the undergraduate student experience. There are many avenues through which to nurture student engagement inside and outside the classroom. Against the demographic backdrop of a largely commuting undergraduate student population that needs to work, along with the desire to encourage students to remain on campus, the concept of RAY emerged. RAY is a strategic, collaborative initiative that enhances both the University's research culture and the undergraduate student experience by employing undergraduate students as research assistants in projects supervised by faculty members.

Students in the RAY program benefit financially as well as academically. The positions are subsidized by the university, with students earning $15/hour for a maximum of 10 hours per week over 32 weeks spanning the fall and winter terms. Only students who

meet the Ontario provincial criteria for financial assistance are eligible to be employed through the RAY program, meaning that those students who normally might not be able to afford the time to volunteer as a research assistant are provided access to this experience. In 2007/08, 96 students were hired through the RAY program; in the summer 2008 term, 113 RAY positions were approved. The number involved in the RAY program has continues to grow this year.

Academically, through their participation in RAY, undergraduate students experience the integration of research and teaching: applying their in-class learning to their outside-class research work; gaining a broader and deeper understanding of research; interacting with faculty members outside class; and observing faculty members in their roles as researchers. When asked what they most valued about the program, students addressed the learning that was made possible through their RAY experience: "I have learned that research takes time, a lot of time;" another said: "There is only so much you can learn and absorb in the classroom. Via RAY we have the opportunity to put our knowledge into practice in the real world." Finally, looking ahead to a possible career as a researcher, student comments included: "I really got to see the drive that is required to be a successful researcher;" and "This experience has made me feel both more confident applying to graduate programs and more certain that this is, in fact, what I want to be doing with my life." The RAY program demonstrates the unity of teaching and research, enhances the university's research culture, and ensures that the undergraduate student experience benefits directly and indirectly from faculty research activity.

Concluding Observations

The longstanding QA regime of external graduate program appraisals and external audit of undergraduate program approvals and reviews has led to an internalization of QA requirements and practices at York University. Nevertheless York has gone far beyond compliance with external QA requirements. It is institutionally and collectively committed to enhancement of the quality of student learning, and of the student learning experience, in ways that go beyond the requirements of the QA regime.

There is little if anything being done at York that is brand new. Creating and sustaining a quality culture has resulted not from the discovery of some dramatically new practice, but from the pervasiveness of multiple, repeated, and reinforcing activities and shared goals. York has gone beyond lip service to quality, and has seen its efforts to engage the entire university community bear fruit. York's goal is to actively involve faculty and staff at all levels in the development of a rich student experience. Just as it "takes a village to raise a child," it "takes an entire university to educate a student." In a culture where everyone has a role to play, resistance to externally mandated QA exercises is mitigated, and quality becomes everyone's responsibility.