Quality and accountability – What can we learn from Ontario, Canada?

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Introduction

When I worked developing vocational education and training policy for the Ontario Government, we often looked to Australia for inspiration. The two systems were born at roughly the same time, out of a need to supply skilled workers for our booming industrial sectors. Reports from both jurisdictions from the 1960s and 1970s often referenced each other. Later on, Ontario borrowed ideas from Australia, like a qualifications framework; training packages and provincial program standards came about at roughly the same time, as did a shift away from awarding qualifications based solely on time spent in the classroom. In short, Australia’s TAFE system looks very similar to Ontario’s system of 24 colleges of applied arts and technology.

Below the surface, however, the differences between the two systems in terms of outputs and outcomes are quite profound. The goal of this paper is to provide some context about the policy and governance environment in which Ontario’s colleges operate, and to highlight some exemplary practices that the TAFEs could consider borrowing. This paper begins with a brief historical and political context of the Ontario college system, and continues with a description of some key elements that distinguish it from the TAFEs. It concludes by highlighting some “easy wins”, ideas that I believe could be made to work in Australia, even in the current policy environment.

Ontario’s Colleges

Ontario is Canada’s most populous province with 13.7 million inhabitants. It has typically been Canada’s economic heartland, making up 36.5 per cent of Canada’s GDP. The province has a system of 24 publicly-assisted colleges, 22 universities, and about 600 registered private career colleges. In Canada, unlike in Australia - and other OECD countries - there is no federal oversight of education; it is solely the responsibility of each province and territory. The reason for this is primarily the fact that the country, at its formation, was made up of two linguistic groups, with two different religions. The result is that Canada boasts not one, but thirteen education systems.

Ontario’s system of public colleges came into being in the late 1960s, when the provincial government decided that the education system needed to meet the skills needs of the province’s booming manufacturing and service sectors. Researchers from Ontario studied a number of international systems, and judged that the new colleges of applied arts and technology should be a parallel system to the universities, with little permeability between the two. The first colleges opened in 1967, with a mandate to deliver technical and applied education to communities across the province at the sub-baccalaureate level.
The system grew steadily until the late 1980s, when the provincial government decided to implement a series of initiatives aimed at driving the sector forward. One of the results was a process to develop provincial standards for programs of study offered in the colleges. To this end, the government established the College Standards and Accreditation Council, which adopted an approach based on learning outcomes. This approach, combined-perversely - with the budget cuts of the mid-1990s, was the key driver of change in the college system. The council was disbanded in 1996, with the responsibility of standards development transferred to the provincial government, which continued with a learning outcomes-based approach. In 2002, in a further devolution of responsibilities, the government enacted legislation making the college system self-governing. In exchange for this, the colleges were required to set up their own program-level quality assurance service, initially called the credentials validation service. This piece of legislation also enshrined advisory committees at the program level for each college, the credentials framework (a qualifications framework for sub-baccalaureate and non-apprenticeship qualifications in the province) and with it, the concept of outcomes-based - rather than time-based - qualifications, as well as the need for colleges to deliver in all programs of instruction, essential employability skills and a basic level of general education.

This combination of outcomes-based vocational skills, transferable essential employability skills, with a small general studies component has meant that the focus of learning at Ontario’s colleges is firmly on the students, and what they are able to do with the knowledge and skills that they have acquired. This approach has been reinforced by the quality assurance mechanism in place in the province and has become deeply embedded in the college system culture.

Two jurisdictions, two different systems

So what are the main differences between the TAFEs and Ontario’s colleges? On the surface there don’t appear to be many. Both are publicly-assisted, engaged with the needs of local enterprises, primarily sub-baccalaureate, and have similar social mandates in terms of admissions and support for under-represented groups. The credentials framework is even, to a certain extent, a reproduction of the original AQF. Moreover, competency-based and outcomes-based training don’t seem to be too different either.

The differences lie with the outputs, the approach and the outcomes. At the output level, the most significant difference is that 51 per cent of all non-apprenticeship qualifications awarded by Ontario’s colleges are at the 2-year diploma level (2012-13). A further 16 per cent were 3-year advanced diplomas, and 11 per cent are at the graduate certificate level. One-year certificates, the rough equivalent of a Certificate III in Australia, account for 26 per cent of the total qualifications awarded. Interestingly, graduate certificates are the fastest growing qualification for Ontario’s colleges. What is most interesting is that this growth is driven by enrolment pressures of university graduates looking for practical skills. The number of university graduates enrolled in colleges has increased more than 40 per cent between 2009 and 2014.³

I have asked myself many times why this difference is so striking, and the best answer that I’ve been able to come up with is that because they are so closely engaged with the colleges and their programming, employers recognise the value of the qualifications, and are willing
to invest their time - if not their money - in their development and improvement. Part of this comes from their recognition of the value of learning outcomes, whose quality is tangibly manifested in the workplace.

**Accountability**
Rather than going into accountability to the government for how the colleges spend public funds it would be more expedient to discuss ways in which colleges are accountable for their outcomes to their individual communities. Each program is required through regulation to have a program advisory committee (PAC), composed of external stakeholders, employers and graduates. The quality of each program is reviewed annually by the committee which proposes changes to ensure continuous improvement and ongoing relevance. The program areas are responsible to each college’s Board of Governors, who monitor performance throughout the institution. Similarly, it is the Board that determines the need for and ultimately approves new programs and is accountable for their ongoing success.

**Development of programs and training material led by educators**
As mentioned previously, the development of provincial standards for college programs of instruction began around the same time as the development of training packages in Australia. Private institutions have been largely excluded from this process in Ontario because the qualifications described in the standards are issued by the provincial government (with the colleges as proxies), and there has never been significant political will (or funding) for the government to establish a quality assurance mechanism for private providers. As a result, the target of the standards has historically been the publicly-assisted colleges.

In Australia, there is considerable emphasis on programs of study being relevant to industry and that this has been the main impetus for the current revisions to the process. I would argue, however, that industry involvement in Ontario is just as great but that it occurs at a different level than in Australia. Industry needs are determined by the PAC of each college offering a program. These are collected and collated by the project officer developing the standard, typically a college faculty member seconded to the government. Each PAC member, as well as industry experts external to the PAC is then given the opportunity to provide feedback on a draft standard. Prior to being finalised, the draft is submitted for validation to ensure that the level and scope of the learning is consistent with the level of the qualification in the credentials framework. The final process is then validated by the vice-presidents academic and a senior government official. Program standards represent the minimum learning requirement for a program, and are very often added to by colleges to meet the specific needs of its local employers. For example, a program in Mechanical Technology may be modified to suit local industries by adding foci such as “Industrial” or “Automotive”. Similarly, some colleges have institution-specific learning outcomes that reflect their desired area of focus. These are often added to programs of instruction, and examples include sustainability and global citizenship.

Program standards express the learning expectations using vocational learning outcomes which are holistic, student-focused statements of attainment, and are able to express what graduates will need for success not just for a particular job but for a career in the area of study. Graduates must also meet the 11 (or, in the case of the French-language colleges, 13)
essential employability skills learning outcomes (in communication, numeracy, critical thinking and problem-solving, information management, and inter- and intra-personal skills). These are typically embedded in the college’s vocational curriculum but may also be delivered through the general education courses. Like competency-based training, vocational learning outcomes are not time-based; they recognise that students learn at different rates. They differ in that they allow each college the flexibility to design programs of study to suit their needs and their student bodies. As such, curriculum is not prescribed by the government.

Not all programs have provincial standards, however those that do not are required, through both internal and external quality assurance processes, to meet the same requirements and rigour, in terms of mapping to the credentials framework and ensuring industry input.

Quality assurance
One of the most significant differences between the TAFEs and Ontario’s colleges is the way in which quality is assured. Because the college system is self-governing, it has its own quality assurance service. This is important because it nurtures the needs of the system, and allows a focus on continuous improvement, not compliance.

Quality in Ontario’s colleges is assured through by the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS); it is performed at two levels, the qualification and the institution. When the colleges were made self-governing in 2002, it was agreed that, in exchange for this autonomy, they would set up their own quality assurance service. Prior to this, new programs of instruction had to be approved by the ministry. By virtue of becoming self-governing, college boards of governors were authorised to approve new programs, but these would have to be validated against the Credentials Framework by the new Credentials Validation Service (CVS). New programs are validated if: (1) their focus is vocational; (2) they are offered at a level consistent with a qualification in the Credentials Framework; (3) the curriculums can reasonably assure that the learning outcomes have been achieved; (4) they meet provincial program standards (where these exist) and (4) they meet the requirements of external regulating bodies, where these exist (as in the case of registered health professions, for example).

After one year of operation, the college presidents requested that an institutional quality assurance mechanism be put in place. This new model, called the Program Quality Assurance Process Audit (PQAPA), was piloted in 2006, and implemented formally in 2007, after having undergone an external evaluation. The PQAPA is based largely on colleges’ ability to meet agreed outcomes in the manner they deem most appropriate, based on their size, student cohort, academic focus, and local community.

Result
As a result of having been given the responsibility to better respond to their local communities and student bodies, and being freed to a certain extent from government regulation, the colleges have become major innovators. A number of institutions, for example, have developed applied research programs that target the needs of local industry. Others, who have opened practice health clinics on campus, have become community hubs. Many have utilised their close connections with local employers to develop
mandatory work placements, or to match apprentices with employers (which is a logical step, given that 90 per cent of Ontario’s apprentices undertake their in-class training at one of the colleges).

Conclusion

Ontario’s colleges have demonstrated that self-regulation, with a focus on meeting the needs of local communities, is key to continuous improvement. A quality culture that places an emphasis squarely on student outcomes has allowed the colleges to develop a workforce that meets the needs of local industry.

The Ontario model of program standards is dependent on the input of local businesses in communities across the province. This bottom-up approach is able to account for the needs of both large and small employers, and because all employers contribute to the end product, and hire the students, they are engaged much more closely throughout the process. It will also help to build a degree of trust between local employers and educational institutions.

What can the TAFEs do?

1. **Push for a move away from competency-based training.** According to Wheelahan (2015): ‘CBT is the curriculum that is used when institutions are not trusted ... This social settlement has delivered a fragmented VET system, with qualifications that are designed for specific jobs even though people do not end up working in those jobs’. A move to a student-focused model for learning will allow the learning experience to focus on careers, rather than jobs. This will eventually allow for deeper learning, and could result in increased enrolments in diplomas, rather than Certificate III and IV qualifications, as well as better opportunities for articulation into degree programs. A stronger knowledge base for graduates will also reduce the need for future retraining, resulting in considerable savings for students, employers and governments.

2. **Educate employers, starting at the community level** (and let them tell government what they learned). Each TAFE should use its industry reference committees to tell employers why they would be better served by employees with higher levels of knowledge and skill.

3. **Engage industry in applied research.** Research projects that meet the needs of local industry are another fairly simple way to engage local businesses more closely, and to create stronger ties between educators and employers.

Further reading

Colleges Ontario 2015, Environmental Scan, [www.collegesontario.org/research/2015_Environmental_Scan/CO_EnvScan_15_Student &GradProfiles_WEB.pdf](http://www.collegesontario.org/research/2015_Environmental_Scan/CO_EnvScan_15_Student &GradProfiles_WEB.pdf)


Notes

1 For the sake of brevity, I’ll use the term “college” to refer them, but that term, when referring to Ontario’s system should not be interpreted in the same way as the in the American system, where it refers generically to all postsecondary institutions.
3 Colleges Ontario 2015, Environmental Scan.
4 Colleges Ontario 2015, Environmental Scan.
6 This is evident not just in the Ontario model but in the northern European one as well.