Setting our Sights: Building a Quality and Accountability Framework for Ontario Universities

Submission to the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities consultations on Multi-Year Agreements

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prepared by:  
Jennifer Chan, Director of Research & Policy Analysis  
Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance  
345-26 Soho Street, Toronto, ON M5T 2B6  
tel: (416) 341.9948 fax: (416) 341.0358  
e-mail: info@ousa.on.ca  
www.ousa.ca
INTRODUCTION: TOWARDS A CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE ON QUALITY

Quality. The word may seem benign, but it is one of the thorniest issues in the higher education field.

Everyone can likely agree that we want a high-quality education system, but this unity begins to fracture when trying to define what quality is, or planning how to achieve it. The result is a widespread sense of suspicion and disdain directed at many types of quality measurement exercises performed by both governments and external parties, ranging from ministry-mandated Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), to the Maclean’s rankings of universities, and websites like RateMyProfessors.ca. When the notion of accountability for public funding is brought into this mix, usually in the form of government requirements for universities to report on certain indicators, the discussion gets even more contentious. These types of demands for greater accountability can often be perceived as infringements upon universities’ autonomy, or even as veiled attacks on faculty and administrative performance.

Government policy-makers working on this issue face a dual challenge: in addition to developing an effective quality assurance framework, the government must obtain some degree of stakeholder support and participation in any accountability measures that are implemented. The best way to achieve both of these elements at once is to ensure that the accountability framework takes into account the perspectives of stakeholders who know the post-secondary system first-hand, and can often make the best recommendations on how to ensure that students get a quality education. That process has been in play throughout the consultation sessions that have taken place across the province, and the provincial government should be commended for initiating the dialogue.

One critique of increasing accountability in post-secondary education is that accountability frameworks don’t necessarily lead to higher quality universities. While this is true, it is impossible for the government to know the best areas to dedicate attention and funding without assessing where the system and institutions are reaching their goals, and where they are not. When done effectively, accountability frameworks could facilitate exchange among the different partners in the higher education system to identify best practices and areas for improvement, and then collectively working to ensure the resources and expertise are in place to effectively address problems. If this consensus and partnership is not in place, accountability exercises could easily degenerate into governments exerting their authority upon unwilling subjects, to the detriment of all.

An important addendum is that quality cannot be discussed in isolation from government funding. While this submission will focus on issues around performance measurement discussed at Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) consultation sessions, the funding component of multi-year agreements must also be addressed in greater detail at a later date. As the government builds the accountability framework of its multi-year agreements, it must also ensure that it provides sufficient, ongoing, and predictable levels of funding to allow institutions to aim for continuous improvement, beyond just enrolment growth. The measurement of university performance will not be a productive exercise if universities are not provided with sufficient resources with which to improve their operations.

In the following submission, we outline recommendations from the Ontario Undergraduate Student Alliance (OUSA) for performance measurement and accountability in the province’s post-secondary system. Our response is structured following the discussion questions provided by the MTCU at consultation sessions. However, prior to addressing the discussion questions, we review our overall approach to quality improvement and measurement, as well as discuss some of the main themes that emerge in our responses to the questions.
PART ONE: OUSA’S APPROACH AND MAIN THEMES

Conflicts that emerge in discussions about quality tend to stem from different perspectives on the rationale and overall goals of quality and accountability exercises. What is the primary purpose of the exercise? Is the goal for universities to meet some minimum standards, to be ranked by the government, to show continuing improvement, or something else? How much control does the government seek to hold over universities’ operations? Rather than launching immediately into our recommendations, it is important to outline our perspective and approach to these issues. This is drawn in part from previous OUSA work on the subjects of accountability and multi-year plans. For a more robust discussion on each of these topics, please see our chapter on governance, accountability and assessment in Our Bright Future: A New Vision for Higher Education in Ontario, as well as our policy papers Measuring Up: Quality Metrics and Accountability in Ontario’s Post-Secondary System, and Multi-Year Plans in Ontario: Securing a Bright Future. All of these papers are available on the OUSA website, www.ousa.ca.

There are three overarching principles and themes that guide OUSA’s recommendations on quality:

Principle One: Quality improvement and measurement should be treated as an ongoing process.

Quality improvement is an ongoing process, where the implementation of changes may take several years to produce observable outcomes. While our electoral system tends to put governments under pressure to produce immediate and quantifiable results, it is unrealistic and counterproductive to expect immediate changes, especially for output or outcome indicators where results can only be observed after a cohort of students has graduated. The government must also recognize that these timeframes may stretch beyond the three-year mandates of multi-year agreements, though it is reasonable to expect some evidence of progress in certain areas within that period of time. OUSA recommends a shift in perspective towards a model of continuous improvement, where universities constantly work towards bettering their past performance, rather than simply seeking to reach a static standard. This can take the form of performance benchmarking, where institutions set goals based on results at other organizations they wish to follow.

This model has been used by some universities through ISO 9001 certification, a voluntary standards exercise developed by the International Organization for Standardization that is used in many different industries and sectors, where organizations must demonstrate that they fulfill certain quality requirements in their organizational activity to achieve certification. Due to the growing interest in ISO certification from educational institutions, special guidelines for the education sector were developed in 2004 in order to make the ISO 9001 certification easier to understand and implement at educational institutions. Numerous post-secondary institutions, including some Canadian colleges and many institutions in Asia have obtained ISO certification. External certification is not the only route for the continuous improvement model; it can also be implemented through general approaches to quality. Some jurisdictions including Sweden, Australia, and the United Kingdom have begun to approach quality as continual improvement, measured by their national quality assurance agencies. Some advantages of this type of quality framework are that it provides some sensitivity to the different contexts faced by each institution, and provides incentive for continual improvement beyond a static target. It has also been noted that the continual improvement approach

1 See Appendix One for descriptions of different types of indicators, including output and outcome indicators.
model has a drawback that it tends not to produce transparent results, because the customization of metrics in this model prevents easy comparisons and rankings of different universities. In order to provide some uniform and comparative data, OUSA has recommended the implementation of a few key common indicators, as we explain in greater detail later in the paper.

Just as OUSA sees quality improvement as an ongoing process, we likewise see the frameworks for monitoring and measuring quality improvement as works-in-progress, where different indicators or tools will likely be tested and rejected for other measures over time. The goal is to build a system that is good enough to understand whether universities are working to continuously improve their level of work, rather than identify the perfect indicators or attempt to build the perfect universities — tasks that are both doomed to failure.

Principle Two: Quality assessment and accountability mechanisms must recognize the different mandates and approaches of each university.

Part of the rationale for OUSA’s recommendation of the ‘continuous improvement model’ outlined above is that it treats each institution as a separate entity, where the goal is to better their individual past performance rather than meet an arbitrary target set province-wide by the government. This approach takes into account the different specializations and niches of different institutions in the province, which include major research universities, undergraduate liberal arts institutions, universities with an interdisciplinary focus, institutions offering co-op education, and institutions that gear their research and teaching curricula to their local interests and industries. Furthermore, different institutions take their own paths to reaching their outcomes, depending on their particular teaching styles and formats. Rather than use a one-size-fits-all format, OUSA’s proposed quality assessment structure would allow universities to develop a set of their own metrics and assessment tools based on their institutional approach and priorities, and then gauge their long-term performance on these measures. The provincial government would review these metrics in order to ensure they are consistent with the overall goals of the province’s higher education system.

OUSA also recommends that a few assessment tools in some core areas be implemented province-wide. While we have aimed to bring a significant degree of customization to our quality assessment model, the province’s universities still do share important commonalities. It is important that certain measures be collected in a uniform way at all institutions, so that province-wide data can be compiled in order to gauge how the system stands. At times, discussions about institutional differences take on the same air as discussing distinct societies in constitutional debates, where universities are treated as wholly separate cultures with their own traditions and ways of doing things. We must not over-extend our particularism, and recognize that there must be some data collected to understand the performance of the system as a whole.

Principle Three: Students must be formally and meaningfully involved in all stages of the process.

OUSA’s final principle guiding our recommendations for multi-year agreements is one of our core issues for the entire higher education sector: students must be involved. As these agreements will have a significant impact on students at each university, students should be meaningfully involved at all stages, including setting the metrics to measure, free access to examine the multi-year agreements, and participation in reporting results.

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At present, students are systemically under-represented or excluded from many governance structures involved in quality assessment at the institutional and governmental level. At the institutional level, students do play a role on their senates, but often in small numbers, and at varying levels across the province:

**Figure One: Student Representation on University Senates at OUSA member schools**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Number of Undergraduate Students on Senate</th>
<th>% of seats</th>
<th>Number of Graduate Students on Senate</th>
<th>% of seats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of Western Ontario</td>
<td>14 of 102</td>
<td>13.7 per cent</td>
<td>4 of 102</td>
<td>3.9 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMaster University</td>
<td>6 of 66</td>
<td>9 per cent</td>
<td>6 of 66</td>
<td>9 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brock University</td>
<td>3 of 53</td>
<td>5.7 per cent</td>
<td>2 of 53</td>
<td>3.8 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilfrid Laurier University</td>
<td>7 of 53</td>
<td>13.2 per cent</td>
<td>1 of 53</td>
<td>1.9 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Windsor</td>
<td>9 of 84</td>
<td>10.7 per cent</td>
<td>2 of 84</td>
<td>2.4 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Waterloo</td>
<td>9 of 88</td>
<td>10.2 per cent</td>
<td>5 of 88</td>
<td>5.7 per cent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen's University</td>
<td>11 of 71</td>
<td>15.5 per cent</td>
<td>5 of 71</td>
<td>7 per cent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Given the significant effect that senate decisions have on students’ quality of education, OUSA recommends that students should have more substantial representation at this type of decision-making body.

At the governmental level, OUSA is also very concerned that there is no student representation mandated for the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO). The council is intended to be an arm’s-length organization that would develop and make recommendations to the MTCU on targets for post-secondary education and performance measures, evaluate post-secondary institutions, and conduct research on related topics. The board would consist of five to seven members appointed by the government, consisting of a chair, a non-voting representative of the MTCU, and several other members. The legislation currently bars certain individuals from holding a position on the board, namely any current board members, executive or senior administrative staff members of either a university or organization representing universities, staff, or students.13

One of OUSA’s concerns about the lack of student representation on HEQCO is that there is a significant amount of detail about the everyday operations of universities and life on campus that cannot be captured by straightforward academic research on quality. By limiting the amount of student input to the council, the government will limit

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7 McMaster University, “McMaster University Members of Senate, 2005-2006”, accessed online at [http://www.mcmaster.ca/univ sec/senate/SenateMembers.pdf](http://www.mcmaster.ca/univsec/senate/SenateMembers.pdf).
11 University of Waterloo, “Current Senate Members”, accessed online at [http://secretariat.uwaterloo.ca/governance/senatemembership.htm](http://secretariat.uwaterloo.ca/governance/senatemembership.htm).
12 Queen’s University, “Senate Membership”, accessed online at [http://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/senate/members.html](http://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/senate/members.html).
13 Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario Act, 2005; accessed online at [http://www.olegals.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/05h28_e.htm](http://www.olegals.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/05h28_e.htm).
HEQCO’s understanding of students’ current concerns about quality, how quality measures could be effectively implemented on campus, and much more.

Based on these concerns, OUSA has recommended that students must have direct and meaningful input in HEQCO’s operations. OUSA has recommended that this involvement should come in the form of input on the selection of HEQCO board members, as well as undergraduate students holding at least one seat on the board. Barring direct representation on the board, another recommendation is that the government should mandate HEQCO to have a subcommittee comprised of student leaders who are available to provide insight and advice on the student perspective on issues facing the council. Any such subcommittee should have representation from undergraduate, graduate, and professional students, as well as college students. Each institution should be mandated by the government to have a Quality Improvement Task Force which should have representation from students. By being regularly connected to the campus level, HEQCO could be much more effective at understanding the real life operations of universities and work to meaningfully improve quality, rather than simply becoming an academic exercise on theories of quality.

PART TWO: FEEDBACK ON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

In the following section, feedback is provided to the discussion questions provided by the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. Our responses all draw upon the principles outlined above regarding quality assessment frameworks in the post-secondary sector.

Question One: Should there be some common as well as different measures for colleges and universities?

OUSA recommends that the province implement a two-pronged quality assessment framework for post-secondary institutions. The province should set broad, system-wide goals for the province, which should be paired with a set of indicators to gauge whether institutions are meeting these system goals. Universities and colleges should also develop some indicators related to their specific missions and niches, and they should be given the freedom to determine how to best deliver results. For both sets of indicators, performance should be measured in terms of their progress over previous years.

The advantage of this bipartite structure is that it provides institutions the ability to gauge their performance according to their own approach and priorities, in part based on each institution’s strategic plan. It also builds upon the structure currently in place where many universities already develop and track their own set of performance indicators. Meanwhile, the system-wide indicators could allow us to track progress on certain province-wide goals from a ‘big picture’ standpoint, which cannot be fully understood from individual institutional reporting. This could be particularly useful in tracking progress on increasing access to post-secondary education. By coordinating and reporting province-wide data on participation on any form of post-secondary education, we can get a better grasp of how students travel through different paths of the post-secondary system such as by transferring institutions, leaving and returning to their studies, and so on. Only examining graduation or retention data on an institutional basis does not give the entire picture; but by collecting and compiling system-wide statistics, the government could gain a much better grasp of areas where the post-secondary system is succeeding, and where it is not. Participation data could also be broken down by different demographics, including aboriginal, francophone, rural, low- and middle-income students.

As for different indicators for different types of institutions, there will likely be some customization on some measures between colleges and universities based on their unique goals and missions. For example, universities’ measures might include rates of their students enrolling in graduate or professional programs, whether their
students conducted individual research during their undergraduate degrees, and so on. However, it must also be recognized that the differences between colleges and universities are diminishing, so the two types of institutions should not be treated as completely different. Many colleges offer degree programs, and there are some joint programs offered by college and university partners, such as the partnership between the University of Guelph and Humber College. At present, some of the differences between the sets of KPIs used by colleges and universities overemphasize differences between the two types of institutions. Some of the outcomes currently used by colleges in their KPI tracking, such as the percentage of graduates working in a related field and student satisfaction, would be equally effective tools at the university level, as they provide some of the information that all prospective students seek when determining their course of study, whether at a college or university.

Question Two: How does one define and measure quality and access?

Part A: Problems with the KPI system

The question of how the government should define and measure quality and access is likely the most complex and subjective issue in the discussions around multi-year agreements. The debates on this issue are fueled by the near-consensus that the KPI system currently used for government accountability exercises does a poor job in gauging the quality of Ontario’s universities.\(^\text{14}\) The KPI system has been in place since 1999 and requires universities to report on three indicators, namely graduation rates by program, graduate employment rates, and OSAP student loan default rates. Starting in 2000, the government began to distribute a $16.5 million Performance Fund based on accessibility (which was defined here as increasing enrolment over the previous year’s numbers) and their rankings on the graduation and employment KPIs, which was increased to $23.2 million in the second year.\(^\text{15}\)

There are several major problems with both the conceptual basis and the operations of the KPI system. From a conceptual standpoint, using three indicators to compare and rank institutions’ performance on an annual basis does little to gauge an institution’s quality, and does not provide much meaningful accountability to students or taxpayers. Simply tracking employment and graduation rates do not tell us anything about the quality of the teaching, the environment on campus, and the knowledge or skills gained by students. Furthermore, by selecting only a few indicators for accountability exercises, heavy weighting is given to employment rates, so the government runs the risk that institutions may begin to prioritize programs which lead more quickly and readily to employment at the cost of other important fields of study such as liberal arts programs.\(^\text{16}\)

Fluctuations in students’ rates of finding jobs and graduating could also be significantly affected by external factors such as economic conditions and demographic shifts, which are unrelated to a university’s performance. For example, universities in rural areas should not be punished if their students have difficulty in gaining employment due more limited job markets. Nor should it be deemed a sign of success for the education system if a university graduate cannot find work in a field related to their studies, and instead takes some form of stopgap employment for which they are overqualified.

Another conceptual problem with the KPIs is that they fail to measure anything related to the core goal of all institutions – for their students to learn. By only tracking outcomes, the KPI system does not measure the relative

\(^{14}\) Colleges use a broader range of KPIs than universities, and are not included in our discussion here.

\(^{15}\) Adam Spence, “Governance, accountability and assessment in higher education”, in Our bright future: a new vision for higher education in Ontario (Toronto: OUSA, 2004), p.106.

\(^{16}\) One recent example of this phenomenon was the Access to Opportunities Program (ATOP), which provided over $60 million in 2003/04 to institutions that increased their enrolment in technology programs such as computer science and engineering. However, many of these students faced difficulty finding work after graduation, after the so-called ‘tech bubble’ burst. This could serve as a warning not to base university program planning too heavily on current job markets.
progress that a university achieves in educating its students. If a university takes a group of relatively low-performing students, but significantly raises their skills, it would not be recognized under the current system. Arguably, much of the institution’s performance can be predetermined in their admissions offices rather than their classrooms, by simply granting admission to top-performing high school students or those from affluent backgrounds, who would tend to produce better results in their graduation and employment rates.

On the operational front, there have been numerous problems with the way the KPIs have actually been deployed by the government and by universities. Many stakeholders have criticized the way that KPIs have been used by the province to distribute performance-based funding. Most universities fell within a fairly narrow range in their performance on the indicators, for example, institutions largely have employment rates between 92 and 98 per cent two years following graduation. However, the distribution of the funds saw institutions ranking at the higher end of the spectrum receiving a much greater proportion of money than universities that performed only marginally poorer on the indicators. For example, in 2002, Queen’s University received roughly three times the level of per student funding as York University, despite an average difference of only 2.2 per cent on the two indicators.17

Another operational problem with the KPI system is that some universities are failing to publicly report their indicators in a timely manner. While the majority of universities have relatively recent data compiled and posted, at the time of writing (May 2006), some institutions provide data that is up to five years out-of-date. The data also tends to be in an inconsistent format, and difficult to find on university websites.

**Figure Two: Some universities are not reporting current Key Performance Indicator data**18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Date of most recent KPI data posted on university website</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Date of most recent KPI data posted on university website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brock University</td>
<td>2003</td>
<td>Queen’s University</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carleton University</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Ryerson University</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Guelph</td>
<td>2001</td>
<td>University of Toronto</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lakehead University</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Trent University</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laurentian University</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>University of Waterloo</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McMaster University</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>University of Western Ontario</td>
<td>2002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nipissing University</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>University of Windsor</td>
<td>2004</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OCAD</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Wilfrid Laurier University</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Ottawa</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td>York University</td>
<td>2003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

17 Ibid.
If the government is serious about implementing an effective quality and accountability framework, it must ensure that after multi-year agreements are signed, that all parties fulfill their obligations to the agreements on an ongoing basis.

OUSA has sought to address some of our central concerns with the KPI system through our recommendations on ways to approach access and quality in performance measurement.

Part B: Defining Access

Most discussions on accountability focus on quality, where the onus is largely on universities to produce results. However, increasing access to higher education is another major component of the government’s post-secondary plan, and there should be a comparable level of accountability from the government, OSAP system, and related parties to demonstrate to the public that the money being invested in student financial assistance is being used effectively and is producing real results. Accountability is not a one-way street affecting only universities, but all parties that are partners in the higher education system.

OUSA has significant concerns about the limited scope of measurement on access outlined in the Draft Measurement and Results Schematic prepared by the MTCU and distributed at consultation sessions. In order to have a fuller understanding about students’ ability to access the higher education system, and barriers that may be in place, we recommend three areas to track regarding access:

1. **The overall participation rate**: The proportion of students in the 18-to-24 demographic attending different types of post-secondary institutions should be tracked in order to understand the level of access at the broadest societal level;

2. **The participation rates of under-represented demographics**: The provincial government has identified several groups as targets for increasing access to post-secondary education, including first-generation students, disabled students, and francophones, and has established advisory committees and dedicated funding to develop strategies to reduce barriers for these groups. In order to understand the level of success for these strategies, the participation rate for these students must be tracked province-wide. This data should also be broken down to track the number of students by program (particularly in higher-cost professional programs), and the proportion of these students who graduate, in order to understand if they are fully accessing the higher education system. Other demographics that have demonstrated patterns of low or declining access, including rural Ontarians and students from middle-income families, should also be tracked.

3. **Student borrowing and loan default rates**: In order to better understand the financial status of students attending post-secondary education in the province, and to track the effects of new tuition and financial aid

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policies, the provincial government should collect data on student borrowing rates, and continue to collect statistics on students’ rates of loan defaults. Borrowing outside of the OSAP system should also be tracked to determine the effectiveness of the government loan program on meeting the educational costs of all students, not just those who qualify.

As noted earlier, it is important that levels of access are thoroughly tracked at a system-wide level, and not just at individual institutions. This will allow us to understand which groups are not reaching our higher education system in large numbers, and who may need particular assistance, both financial and otherwise, in order to access the many social and economic benefits of post-secondary education. Tracking this data over time will also allow us to gauge our success at making our universities more accessible.

Information on access should also extend beyond just quantitative measures. The government must try to understand why some groups of people tend not to enter the post-secondary system, devise programs to reduce barriers, and then measure their progress. This will likely involve numerous strategies, as there are many reasons why students don’t enroll in post-secondary, including inadequate financial assistance, lack of access to technology, not thinking about university as an option, debt aversion or sticker shock.

Part C: Defining Quality

With the large number of students, professors, courses and programs in any university, no single tool or indicator could accurately be used to identify a ‘high-quality’ institution. Instead of getting tangled in debates about the meaning of quality, OUSA recommends gauging whether universities are positively impacting students’ skills and abilities. Our suggestions are guided by the overarching principles that quality measurement should not only examine the outputs of the system (such as graduation and employment rates), but also take into account the beginning characteristics of the students that enroll in each institution. A university should not be considered the ‘best performer’ if it only admits the best students. OUSA therefore recommends that any attempt to measure quality should take a holistic approach, and examine the beginning characteristics of students, inputs, outputs and outcomes of the institution, in order to understand how institutions deliver quality and add value to the educational experiences of students.

Some possible indicators to track include:21

- **Beginning Characteristics**: Students’ secondary school marks, family income, age, gender, and ethnicity should be tracked to understand the skills and backgrounds of students at the moment of entry into university, and in order to contextualize the outputs and outcomes further down the line.

- **Inputs**: University funding per student, student-faculty ratios, infrastructure indicators are important indicators to track the resources available for students at their institution. A tool such as the College Learning Assessment (CLA) could also be explored to determine how inputs impact learning outcomes.

- **Learning Outputs**: In order to fully examine the outputs of students’ time at an institution, the government should examine academic outputs such as skills acquired (e.g. problem-solving, writing, teamwork, creativity), enrolment information such as time to completion and retention rates (especially among under-represented demographics). The results of National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) are very

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21 These recommendations are based in part on Ross Finnie and Alex Usher, “Measuring the quality of post-secondary education: concepts, current practices and a strategic plan” (Ottawa: Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2005), p.31-32. For fuller definitions of the different types of metrics, please see Appendix One.
important to track, as they examine both the student’s engagement and learning at an academic level, as well as important student life issues that are also vital to students’ development, including their participation in the community, the level of support for non-academic responsibilities such as work and family, contact with students from other social, economic, or ethnic backgrounds, and so on.\textsuperscript{22}

- **Final Outcomes:** Rather than just tracking employment rates, the government should examine measures tracking whether their university education helped them reach their long-term goals. This could be done in part by tracking levels of employment in related field, earnings, students’ satisfaction with their education, rates of continuing to graduate study, and levels of lifelong learning.

If possible, the provincial government should attempt to build its quality framework upon data that is already being collected, to minimize the added workload needed to collect the data. Much of this data is already being collected by university registrars, so rather than beginning from scratch, the framework would require the data collection to be standardized in format and compiled. However, new surveys would need to be conducted in order to collect data on measures such as skills obtained, employment in a related field, satisfaction with education, and lifelong learning.\textsuperscript{23}

Beyond identifying measures related to quality, the manner in which the government constructs its quality frameworks is very important. These frameworks must be sensitive to the operations at universities, where every element is likely connected to others. Policy-makers must ensure that selecting an indicator or setting a particular target does not lead to negative spin-off effects as the institution attempts to reach that goal. In order to avoid such a scenario, OUSA recommends that a range of indicators are used in any quality assessment framework so that no single indicator or a few indicators are given heavy weighting, and attempts should be made to understand how the indicators are connected. This seeks to prevent possible outcomes where universities attempt to shift their operations to improve their performance on a single measure, which often leads to negative repercussions in other areas as resources are diverted to the one priority measure. The use of multiple measures could also prevent a university’s results from being skewed by external factors unrelated to its operations, such as demographic fluctuations, economic conditions, changes in the job market, and so on.

**Question Three: What outcomes could the Ministry expect from institutions?**

OUSA suggests that the MTCU should set out a few expectations from institutions, both at the outcome and process level. These are necessary to ensure that the quality measurement exercise is implemented across the province in an effective manner.

On outcomes, rather than setting standardized targets that universities must achieve, the government should require institutions to demonstrate continued improvement on their goals. This could occur by requiring institutions to prepare annual quality improvement reports that track their progress on meeting broad system goals for improving quality and access, as well as their institution-specific goals. The reports could examine the institution’s progress over a period of a few years to see longer-term changes and trends. They could also discuss some of the context behind some of the changes, both positive and negative, in order to understand what has produced these results. It would be important that these reports be open about discussing both positive and negative results of assessment exercises, in order to identify successes as well as areas that require more work. This approach could be promoted by treating the reporting in a constructive manner, where universities could explore some of the underlying problems

\textsuperscript{22} National Survey of Student Engagement, “NSSE 2006 Canadian Version”; accessed online at \url{http://websurvey.indiana.edu/nssedemo/2006/?guest=canadian}.

at their institutions and push the province for targeted funding for these projects, rather than seeing the reports as admissions of failure.

There are also important requirements that the government should mandate at the process level. Firstly, the government should require that universities meaningfully involve students in the process of developing the quality assessment indicators on campus, as well as assessing the institution's performance and discussing causes or factors relating to its performance. Also, the government must mandate that any reporting be made publicly available, ideally centrally through the MTCU website or the future HEQCO website, as well as on institutions’ websites. As the experience with mandated KPI reporting demonstrates, some institutions may fall behind on their reporting responsibilities if only required on their own websites. Lastly, the government should mandate institutions to implement the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) or other survey tools adopted by the MTCU to assess the quality of institutions. The government should also ensure sufficient funding is in place for institutions to carry out these requirements.

**Question Four: What is the Ministry’s role in defining results?**

The ministry’s primary role is in managing and coordinating the quality framework. First, in conjunction with HEQCO (once established) and in consultation with stakeholders, the government should define broad goals for the higher education system. It should also act as a check to ensure that the specific goals developed by each institution are in the best interests of its students and Ontarians.

Second, the ministry, in conjunction with HEQCO, should benchmark Ontario’s higher education system with other jurisdictions, research best practices in Ontario and abroad, and continuously build on our emerging understanding of quality assessment.

Third, the ministry should work with stakeholders to both solicit feedback about what their collective goals are for the higher education system, and promote buy-in to ensure all the different groups (administration, faculty, students) contribute constructively to the process.

**Question Five: What is the institution’s role in defining results?**

In the dual-layered quality framework outlined in the response to Question One, OUSA recommends that institutions should play a substantial role in outlining their own institutional goals and defining the results they hope to achieve. Each institution should set goals and define measures specific to their mission and approach, in order to track progress in their priority areas, but they also need to demonstrate how they will meet system-wide goals for the whole province.

Students and other on-campus stakeholders should be an integral part of defining institution-specific goals. This could occur through a quality improvement taskforce, or similar bodies that already exist on many campuses and that have student representation.

**Question Six: What should be the link be between funding and accountability?**

This is likely the discussion question that will raise the largest amount of contention among stakeholders. Indeed, in their recent study on measuring quality in post-secondary education, Ross Finnie and Alex Usher chose to remain
“resolutely neutral” on the relationship between quality measurement and accountability exercises, in order to avoid the politicization of quality measurement issues.\(^{24}\)

Rather than try to wade into the politics of university accountability, our approach to the issue is to examine the overall goals of the system, and attempt to calculate how best to reach them. As we have outlined elsewhere in this paper, the ultimate intent of accountability should be continuous improvement, so if institutions are faltering or not reaching their goals, removing funding from them would make matters worse. For example, a cut in funding caused by an institution failing to meet a target could make it more difficult to hire the best faculty, or to offer programs with up-to-date curriculum or equipment. This type of punitive framework runs the risk of stifling innovation at universities, as it would likely act as a disincentive for universities to take any risks in their program offerings or operations. Any quality framework introduced by the government must ensure that it does not further impact upon the quality of education at that institution or negatively affect students, as that would run counter to the overall goals of the accountability exercise.

In other jurisdictions, universities were offered an incentive to meet their targets that would have a highly detrimental impact upon their students. If institutions in the University of Florida and Florida State University systems fulfilled their obligations in a five-year ‘contract’ with the state government, they would be given unlimited flexibility to set their tuition levels without any constraints, effectively deregulating tuition.\(^{25}\) These types of consequences must be avoided in Ontario. The effects that would be faced by students would likely supersede any benefits achieved by a university reaching its targets.

An alternate option for the accountability element of multi-year plans would be to require institutions that are not reaching their goals to meet with a ministry representative in order to examine potential problems and solutions. Essentially, universities would lose a degree of autonomy rather than funding until the ministry and institution mutually agree on a course of action.

**Question Seven: How should the ministry balance the interplay between system-wide results and the mission-specific role of each institution?**

Maintaining a balance between measuring the performance of the system as a whole, while respecting the respective missions and approaches of each university is a cornerstone of OUSA’s approach to quality measurement exercises. As a consequence, it has been extensively discussed throughout this submission. However, the following is a brief recap.

OUSA has recommended that a few indicators should be used province-wide for all universities, and there would be a few indicators that would be developed by each university. (If several universities are measuring common outcomes, the reporting of results should be standardized to allow for cross-institutional comparisons.) Institutions would be required to develop an annual plan and report annually on its results, and both the system-wide and institution-specific goals and results should be available to the public. The development of both the province-wide and institutional goals should be a collaborative process, where all parties work to ensure the best goals are established. For the system-wide goals, the ministry should involve stakeholders to build consensus around a few goals, and then universities should be free to devise plans to meet them. At the institutional level, all on-campus stakeholders should be involved to build consensus around institution-specific goals, and the ministry should act as a check to ensure the goals are adequate, realistic, and in the interests of students and Ontarians.


CONCLUSION

The topics of quality and accountability are issues in the higher education field that many would rather avoid. However, comparing OUSA’s recommendations on accountability with submissions by other stakeholders such as the Council of Ontario Universities and the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, there is a great deal of shared ground among these groups representing different interests. While not all parties feel that universities require more external accountability to the government, recommendations about sensitivity to differences between universities and locally-developed performance indicators have a significant amount of overlap. This bodes well for the next stage of work for developing multi-year agreements.

APPENDIX ONE: Glossary of Quality Metrics

The indicators used in this paper are based on Daniel W. Lang’s “The Political Economy of Performance Funding”.27

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input Indicators</th>
<th>Process Indicators</th>
<th>Output Indicators</th>
<th>Outcome Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What universities start with (e.g. students, funding, amount of space)</td>
<td>What universities do with their inputs (e.g. class sizes, curricula, workloads, faculty-student contact)</td>
<td>What universities produce (e.g. graduation rates, cost per student)</td>
<td>Overall outcome (e.g. graduate satisfaction, employer satisfaction, job placement of graduates)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are some variations on these classifications used by different authors. Finnie and Usher have slightly different classifications:28

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beginning Characteristics</th>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Learning Outputs</th>
<th>Potential Final Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attributes of students entering the university (e.g. age, secondary school marks, financial savings)</td>
<td>What universities input into the system (e.g. funding per student, physical infrastructure, student-staff ratio)</td>
<td>Abilities of students after attending university (e.g. graduation rates, problem solving skills, communication skills)</td>
<td>Overall outcome (e.g. employment, earnings, civic engagement, satisfaction with education)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
