

## *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Boon or Boondoggle?*

Speaking Notes for Dr. James Downey, President & CEO  
Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario  
Canadian Institutional Research and Planning Association  
St. John's, Newfoundland  
October 22, 2007

### **Check against delivery**

So, let me end the suspense you all must have felt since you read the title of my talk: *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Boon or Boondoggle?* Which will he choose, you must have asked yourselves impatiently -- this president of a quality research agency? Well, the answer is less clear cut than you might have expected. Quality assurance is a bit of both: a little bit of boon, and a little bit of boondoggle. But mostly it's neither. Rather, it is a moral imperative for institutions that hold quality to be central to all they do, and it is a political necessity in an age of accountability.

As becomes a professor of English long since fallen from grace into administration but still remembering how to footnote, let me begin with definitions of the words 'boon' and 'boondoggle.' Both are slightly onomatopoeic words. That is to say, their sound suggests their meaning. 'Boon' is an English derivative of the French word 'bon,' with all its positive connotations. It means gift – something granted to benefit or please. 'Boondoggle,' on the other hand, as you might guess, is of obscure origin, and means "pointless, unnecessary, or time-wasting work." It has broad application in contemporary society.

When I say I believe quality assurance is a bit 'boondoggle' I'm not suggesting there's a swindle going on in our universities and colleges. But I do think it would be naive of us who are obliged to think about such questions, and to draw conclusions for action from the answers, not to see the quality assurance movement in some respects as a fad.

Speaking of fads . . . When Paul Chancey called to ask me for a topic for this talk I was re-reading Robert Birnbaum's *Management Fads in Higher Education: Where They Come From, What They Do, Why They Fail*. It's a critical and witty assessment of the

rise and fall of management fads in higher education since the 1960s, a management book that's an honest-to-god good read. The management fads in question are the blessedly brief and late adaptations to colleges and universities of techniques and practices developed in the private sector or government. This will give you a feel for Birnbaum's style:

I have two dogs and three cats. They all have fur, four legs, and tails. The physiology and biochemistry of both species are quite similar, and they share much of their genetic structure. But they behave differently. The dogs come when they are called, seek affection and attention, and warn when strangers approach. The cats come when they feel like it and hide under the bed when strangers lurk. Why can't a cat be more like a dog?

On the other hand, I have to walk the dogs even in the freezing rain, while the cats use the sandbox in the warm, dry basement. And the dogs need to be washed, brushed, and clipped, while the cats groom themselves fastidiously. So why can't a dog be more like a cat?

I think about dogs and cats whenever someone says, "Why can't a university be more like a business? (215)

Birnbaum presents seven case studies of recent management fads. Hands up, those who remember PPBS (Planning Programming Budgeting System)? What about MBO (Management by Objectives)? How about ZBB (Zero-based Budgeting), or TQM (Total Quality Management), or Business Process Engineering? Remember how messianic they seemed? Where have they gone?

Birnbaum is neither glib nor snide about how management fads play out in higher education. Nor do I wish to be. Colleges and universities are integrated into the economic and political systems of society, so it is not surprising to find that they are influenced by the prevailing ideas that shape the way business and government are done. And in the end, by being laggard about the absorption of these new theories, colleges and universities can usually avoid the costs of being on the experimental vanguard.

There's a delicious irony here: the institutions that most profess faith in experiment and innovation in their research agendas are the slowest to adopt new ideas into their management systems. But who can argue with the results. Birnbaum writes: "Economic enterprises may require constant change to survive. But institutions survive and prosper because their consistent, mission-driven values have been internalized by their participants and confirmed as important by the culture in which they function. Constancy is more important than change because it is this very continuity of practice that leads to reliable mission-based performance. . . . Consider this: only one of the twelve largest business firms in 1900 still existed in 2000. But each one of the twelve largest public and private universities in 1900 exists and still thrives one hundred years later." (220) So if survival is finally the best measure of success, chalk one up for colleges and universities.

Which is to say that colleges and universities have a way of containing the forces of change that engender and propagate fads. And this is largely a strength, not a weakness. Colleges and universities are three simultaneous incarnations in one: corporation, collegium, and culture. It is possible (not easy, but possible) to change corporate practice and administrative process. The same is true for collegial practice and process. The more difficult challenge is to effect change in the culture of an institution. There, change can only be effected from within. With patience and persistence it can be done, but not at the speed that favours faddism.

So I come to the little gloss that accompanies my title: "No less than other organizations, universities and colleges are susceptible to management fads. Is quality assurance another one, or does the current focus on learning quality signal a major change in the way we fulfill our mission? The founding president of the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario will explain why he thinks quality assurance may be the real deal."

Here are three, among many, reasons for my belief that this may be the case.

1. We need quality assurance for economic productivity.
2. We need quality assurance to be properly accountable.

3. We need quality assurance to help us tell the truth about ourselves.

Let's take them in that order.

**We need quality assurance for economic productivity.** There is no need, for an audience such as this, to emphasize the relation between higher education and a prosperous society. You not only know that article of faith, you can repeat the antiphonal response. In fact, perhaps you feel, as I do, that we have exaggerated and overemphasized that narrative at the expense of broader and deeper and ultimately more important values of higher learning. Universities and colleges exist not just to serve the needs of the economy, but to enrich and ennoble human life and society. Our graduates, no matter what trade, occupation, or profession they may have chosen, are also citizens, members of families and communities, and our advocacy as well as our curricula should reflect this.

That said, it is still true that the nature of technological change has given greater weight to the value of higher education. While technology has reduced the need for certain skills, it has heightened the demand for skilled workers. Skills date more rapidly and need to be replenished.

And there is another dimension to this issue, one that has special relevance for people, like myself, who dye their hair white. Nicholas Barr has written: "The rising proportion of older people foreshadows increased spending on pensions, medical care, and long-term care. Part of the solution is to increase output sufficiently to meet the combined expectations of workers and pensioners. If workers are becoming relatively more scarce, the efficient response is to increase labour productivity." (*Taking Public Universities Seriously*, eds. Frank Iacobucci & Carolyn Tuohy, University of Toronto Press 2005, 442).

According to research of the Institute for Competitiveness and Prosperity, Canadian workers are less productive than American. There is, it seems, a demonstrable productivity gap. If this is true, there is a challenge here that increased access alone won't meet. Only a commitment to improved quality, justly measured, will close the gap.

And even if that gap didn't exist, demography would, as Barr suggests, provide a compelling case for enhanced quality.

**We need quality assurance to be properly accountable.** Quality assurance as a policy domain of higher education is a by-product of the transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education. The United States was the first nation to experiment with the three major methods of quality assurance: accreditation, audit and assessment. The Europeans caught up quickly, especially in the late 1980s, perhaps as a result of the growing awareness of the need to more closely align national systems. By the end of the 80s the British and the Australians had caught the spirit, as strong central governments exercised their fiscal powers to effect significant change in their institutions. Meanwhile, in Canada, the debate about quality assurance has only recently been joined.

It may be worth pausing to consider the question of why it has taken us so long to get there. A couple of reasons are most frequently cited. One of them is best rendered in a joke that was popular at the time of the Meech Lake Accord.

Several scholars of various nationalities were engaged in writing books on the elephant. The German prepared a thick volume with numerous charts and diagrams entitled *A Brief Introduction to the Study of the Elephant*. The Frenchman published a slim and attractive book entitled *The Elephant and His Love Life*. The American produced an advertising brochure, *How to Raise Elephants in Your Backyard for Fun and Profit*. The Canadian, after extensive consultation, published a report entitled *The Elephant: A Federal or Provincial Responsibility?*

I find this reasoning unconvincing for it fails to answer the question of why there hasn't been more experimentation with quality assurance regimes at the provincial level. Or is it perhaps true that when people are free to do as they please they generally follow each other?

At any rate, I believe there is much more to be said for the second explanation that is sometimes offered for our reluctance to make a rigorous quality assurance commitment.

Governments in Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand took direct and sustained action to reform their higher education systems because they deemed them not sufficiently responsive to the changes and challenges of their national societies and economies. The criticisms leveled against the universities and colleges in those countries were that: (a) they were too elitist; (b) they were not producing enough graduates for the highly-skilled labour market, particularly in those hard-edged economic areas such as engineering, computer science, and business; (c) they lacked efficiency and accountability in their organization and management; and (d) they were too dependent upon government for their support.

The same could not be said, then or now, to be true of Canadian colleges and universities, which have responded very well to the social, political, and economic challenges of the past quarter century, especially with respect to access.

Of late, however, another powerful accountability force has come into play. We live in a time of government by auditor-general. The normative political correctness of the 1980s and 1990s has been transmuted into legislative and bureaucratic political correctness. Like so many trends, accountability has its roots in business behaviour in the United States. Enron and WorldCom begat Sarbanes-Oxley, which begat a steady drizzle of legislative reform, which begat a blizzard of compliance requirements, which begat a hurricane of bureaucratic enforcement. In due course we will settle into a saner and less-consumptive way of meeting the requirements for moral rectitude in the conduct of public and private business. In due course a greater measure of trust will be restored and, with it, a greater measure of efficiency. For now, however, we have little choice but to accept that a greater and more formal and more time-consuming regimen of accountability is upon us, and non-compliance is not an option.

HEQCO's mandate emphasizes access, quality, and accountability. This triumvirate, it turns out, are not so much cousins as siblings. The link between access and quality is obvious, for when we speak of ensuring access to higher education, the question immediately arises 'access to what?' If we cannot ensure that students get an education that will enrich and empower them, then the promise of access rings hollow. The relation between quality and accountability is no less intimate. To ensure quality is

to assure accountability. To do so, however, there must be demonstrably effective and reliable methods of measurement. But more of that later.

**We need quality assurance to enable us tell the truth about ourselves.** On the one hand, with an audience of politicians and bureaucrats in mind, we say the sky is falling. Government investment is declining, student/faculty ratios are rising, deferred maintenance is alarming, and the whole academic enterprise is imperiled. On the other hand, with an audience of prospective students, their parents, donors, or alumni in mind, the situation is dramatically improved: an excellent education and a rich co-curricular experience await all who register, research is expanding and giving great promise of solving society's problems, the fundraising campaign will surpass its targets, and our grateful graduates are finding rewarding employment.

And here's the thing: we believe both stories to be true, even though we lack sufficient evidence to substantiate either. Or perhaps, more accurately, we can hold both stories to be true because no one knows enough to disprove either. Of late there has been a deepening consensus that we need better, more sophisticated measures of academic quality, and universities and colleges have been taking steps to address the challenge. But more of that later. My point here is to stress that a compelling reason for quality assurance is to enable us the better to tell the truth about ourselves.

If quality assurance is essential to the higher educational enterprise, what shape should it take in our colleges and universities? Before I attempt to answer that question, I interrupt this broadcast for a word from my sponsor, the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario.

The Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is an independent research agency funded by the Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. The Council has 7 members and is composed of some exceptional people, led by our chair, the Honourable Frank Iacobucci.

I was appointed last January as employee number 1. Since then we have recruited some unusually talented people, and we now number about a dozen. In addition to

building our infrastructure, we have been doing as much listening and learning as we can through visits, meetings, colloquia, workshops, and conferences.

The Council has been asked by the Ontario government to provide, among other things, leadership in creating a quality framework for the postsecondary education sector. We are also asked to monitor and report on accessibility; to study inter-institutional transfer; and to advise on system design and on what is needed to ensure that institutions are able and willing to respond to increased demands.

We will make recommendations on steps to improve the quality of, and accessibility to, postsecondary education programs. We will advise the government on targets that should be set to improve postsecondary education and the timeframes for achieving those targets. We will also provide the minister with recommendations on performance measures that can be used to evaluate the sector.

To achieve its aims, the Council has undertaken an ambitious research program. The details of the program are in our first *Review and Research Plan* published in July, and available at [www.heqco.ca](http://www.heqco.ca). Some of you have recently had a chance to hear my colleague, HEQCO's Vice President Research, Dr. Ken Norrie, describe that research agenda and some of the projects that have been proposed to operationalize the plan. I will only say here that we have been (a) encouraged by the support we have received and (b) impressed with the amount of quality assurance work being done in colleges and universities. In this respect a quantum change has occurred since even the 1990s; Canadian institutions of higher education have become seized of the need to demonstrate with facts and figures the claims they make for themselves. More constructively still, they have come to realize that they need better evidence-based research for their own planning purposes.

Research results are harvested, not manufactured, so the fruits of our work at HEQCO will be more apparent over the next couple of years than they are today. Over time I hope you will see the Council having a significant effect on what we know about both the strengths and weaknesses of our higher education system. In doing so, I hope and intend that we should link with agencies doing similar work in other provinces.

For HEQCO, two related issues will get early emphasis: (1) the character and quality of undergraduate teaching and learning; and (2) how best to construct a quality framework for Ontario's colleges and universities.

More than at any other time during my longish career in higher education, I believe a significant change in the poor-sibling status of teaching and learning may be coming about, especially in our universities where research has captured many of the resources and much of the acclaim.

What is my evidence that such change is possible? Mindful of the tyranny of the clock, I shall limit my broad indicators to three.

The first is that there is a growing interest on the part of universities and colleges in understanding student engagement with learning, and in publishing the results. Part of the impulse for this may have to do with countering the *Maclean's* annual rankings of universities, but even more of it is fostered by the development of new engagement survey tools, the National Survey of Student Engagement for universities and the Ontario College Student Engagement Survey.

It is early days for NSSE and OCSES, and whether institutions will actually make effective use of the results to improve undergraduate teaching and learning remains to be seen. But at least we finally have an instrument that attempts to measure something other than inputs. Hence the excitement.

The largest single piece of HEQCO's program will aim to develop a quality framework for higher education. Many discrete activities take place today in the name of quality-assurance, including program appraisals, student surveys, key performance indicators, measures of inputs per student, and the like. Each of these activities was developed separately. But in Ontario at least we have not until now asked: how do the pieces fit together? What more do we need to do so that students, parents, politicians, and the public at large can feel confident that our colleges and universities are doing what we expect of them? And how can we do it in a way that doesn't sink us under the dead weight of bureaucracy?

The second piece of evidence I would offer in support of my proposition is that many universities and colleges have made significant investment in teaching programs and centres designed to assist professors and graduate students to improve their teaching and communication skills, to acquaint them with a bit of the evidence-based scholarship of teaching and learning, and to enable them to adapt their courses to changing interests and technologies.

Some of the initiatives being taken are highly innovative. To cite an example that has received – and justly – much press, the University of British Columbia has attracted the American Nobel laureate, physicist Dr. Carl Wieman. For a nation (Canada) that has only had four Nobel Laureates of its own since 1970, and none in more than a decade, this is a significant event. What is even more remarkable, however, is that Wieman didn't move to UBC to do physics research but “to support science departments in their efforts to provide an unrivaled education for ...undergraduate students...” Over the next five years UBC plans to spend \$12 million on a project to improve undergraduate teaching in science. As the young are wont to say, how great is that!

What Wieman's work on the improvement of science teaching speaks to is something of potentially momentous importance. It is that at long last scientists are beginning to take seriously the research on learning theory and the neuro- and cognitive science that lies behind it.

The third piece of evidence I would offer is a new book by perhaps the most influential figure in American higher education of the past thirty years. I'm referring to the former president of Harvard University, Derek Bok. Bok, who is now 78 (and by virtue of that alone, my hero), had a most successful run as president of Harvard from 1971 to 1991. He also stepped into the breach again last year when President Larry Summers left office abruptly. Bok's record as an academic leader, plus a steady stream of insightful and influential books both during his presidency and since, have made him perhaps the single most respected figure in American higher education today.

His most recent book, *Our Underachieving Colleges: A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should Be Learning More* (Princeton University Press,

2006), is a severe but constructive critique of America's undergraduate programs. "When one moves from opinion polls to direct evidence of student learning," he writes, "the reasons for concern grow clearer. Most studies do show evidence of growth, but almost all the findings leave ample room for improvement. . . . Surveys of student progress in other important dimensions, including writing, numeracy, and foreign language proficiency indicate that only a minority of undergraduates improve substantially, while some actually regress." (312)

What makes Bok's criticism the more potent is that he writes from inside the establishment. The elite establishment. The elite establishment of a national university system that is regarded as the best in the world. No matter what the international agency doing the ranking, the results nearly always show more than 75% of the world's best universities to be American, with Harvard at or near the top. When someone like Derek Bok joins the chorus of those who wish to elevate and reform undergraduate education, this is significant.

It would seem then that major change is blowing in the wind for teaching and learning. HEQCO's role will be to take stock of what we know and of what we need to know to create a quality framework to measure and direct the investment of time, labour, and treasure that will need to be made if we are to have a quality assurance regime that works. To this end HEQCO will focus squarely on a quality framework that will encompass four kinds of indicators so usefully set out by Ross Finnie and Alex Usher in *Measuring the Quality of Post-secondary Education: Concepts, Current Practices and a Strategic Plan* (CPRN, 2005):

Beginning characteristics – the accomplishments and abilities of incoming students that affect learning;

Learning inputs – financial, administrative, social and academic supports available, including faculty, staff and the programs they provide;

Learning outputs – the knowledge and skills of graduates acquired or refined by their learning experience;

Final outcomes - the beneficial opportunities higher education makes possible: employment, job-satisfaction; civic participation, and continued education.

Where our work on these and other quality-assurance issues will lead – that is to say, what policy advice to government it will allow us to offer – is impossible (or at least imprudent) to speculate on. But if I had to hazard a guess about general direction, I would say that we are more likely to emphasize Quality Enhancement than Quality Assessment, though to be sure both have their role. Quality assessment stresses measurement, external accountability and regulatory control. It identifies issues and uses sanctions to get institutions to comply with the regulatory framework. Quality assessment is mainly about compliance, and therefore accountability. Such is clearly necessary and governments will insist upon it.

Quality enhancement, on the other hand, “places an emphasis on a range of teaching and learning activities across the institution. . . . It places institutional learning at the core of its framework and has the potential to engage [students, faculty and] staff in bringing about improvements in teaching and learning.” (*Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, eds. Don F. Westerheijden, Byorn Stensaker, and Maria Jaoa Rosa, Springer, the Netherlands, 2007, 211). Both quality assessment and quality enhancement have their purpose, but it is the latter that encourages people to take chances on new ways of doing things, and to share best practices widely.

The heightened interest in the quality of postsecondary education, of which the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario is a concrete expression, presents an opportunity to consider the broad value of higher education to a person, a province, or a nation. So as we weigh how best to eliminate obstacles to student access and mobility, we need to be mindful of the substance and quality of what it is we are trying to ensure access to. As we consider how to measure quality in higher education, we should be careful not to neglect indicators related to social gains for graduates and their children: improved health, greater engagement in community organizations, reduced crime rates, environmental awareness. And as we formulate research and innovation strategies for economic development, we need to remind ourselves, as Richard Florida has done, that

the cultivation of talent and tolerance may be as important as the new knowledge and technology we are striving to develop.

I recognize that this view presents its own challenges to the entire postsecondary education sector. If we expect our institutions to produce graduates who can think critically, who are ethically aware, who can engage fully as citizens, and who are equipped to learn throughout their lives, then we also need to ask whether our curricula incorporate those objectives, whether our faculty teach them, whether students are learning them, and whether those who fund higher education – governments, students, employers, and donors -- are providing resources that are adequate to the task.

Does it mean that we should ignore issues that bear on economic returns and productivity gains of higher education? Not at all. What it does mean is that we embrace the challenge for education in a democratic society, which is to equip all citizens to live productive and fulfilling lives, not merely as producers and consumers of goods and services, but as creators and enjoyers of their capacities for skill development, for rational understanding, for moral judgment and action, for aesthetic expression or contemplation, for friendship and love.

And that mission is ultimately no different for colleges than for universities. It is about helping people, across the broad spectrum of skilled trades, occupations, and professions, to gain access, aim higher, and achieve more. As John William Gardner put it, "The society which scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy. Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water."

CIRPAs, in your role as Sherpas, have a major role to play in this. I know from personal experience how much presidents and vice-presidents depend on the information and the analysis you provide. I know what a tremendous asset it is to have a strong institutional analysis and planning office. I also know that the challenge that confronts us requires not only competence but commitment and a measure of idealism.

Together we must seek to ensure that the data we gather, the information we process, the numbers we crunch, the analysis we perform, the indicators we select, the benchmarks we set all contribute to a more coherent and compelling understanding of our purpose and mission.

That, and that alone, will ensure quality assurance is a boon, not a boondoggle.

###