

Campus Alberta Quality Council Three-Year Review

Executive Summary and Action Plan

July 2008

Executive Summary

As part of a three-year review of its operations, the Campus Alberta Quality Council surveyed its members and stakeholders. Two questionnaires were drafted by Council members and the CAQC Secretariat. An independent external contractor reviewed, revised and formatted the questionnaire forms in consultation with the Secretariat.

Design and Administration

The member questionnaire has 47 multiple-choice questions, 25 in the self-evaluation section and 22 in the Council evaluation section, as well as two open-ended questions and two questions asking for information about the member's service on Council. All the multiple-choice questions provided space for additional comments by the respondents. The stakeholder questionnaire has 16 multiple-choice questions with space for comments, four open-ended questions, and four questions about the institution.

The questionnaires were mailed to current and past Council members who had served within the last three years and to representatives of the post-secondary institutions with which Council works. Questionnaires were returned directly to the external contractor to ensure confidentiality. Nine of 11 Council members completed the member questionnaire and 19 of 21 stakeholders completed the stakeholder questionnaire.

For reporting purposes, the questions were grouped by the issues they addressed, giving eight groups for the member questionnaire and four groups for the stakeholder questionnaire.

Member Questionnaire

Member responses showed high satisfaction with the Council, the support of the Secretariat, and their own contributions, although having some concerns about workload and a strong feeling that the Secretariat needs increased resources. One member commented, "*There has been a significant increase in workload since I was appointed*", and another said "*I sense the Secretariat is overworked. Additional staff would prevent delays that I sometimes sense occur.*"

There was a lack of consensus about the need for increased visibility and public communications for the Council. In one member's opinion, "*The Council does an appropriate number of contacts with stakeholders, its website gives the public a clear view of procedures, board members are identified, reviewers identified, decisions indicated. We do not need to promote our work.*" Another said "*We need to be more visible publicly. We also need to be more visible within the Ministry. Such visibility would not, if carefully managed, impair our ability to maintain independence.*"

One strength of Council identified in the open-ended questions is the quality of thought, research and co-operation that goes into Council's decisions. In the words of one member, "*Members are knowledgeable and most diligent about reading and researching. Members also get along very well – they respect one another. Our chair is outstanding as was the first. Meetings are very efficiently run. Members are also very aware of the urgency around timeliness.*" There was no common thread in suggestions for improvement.

Comments were also made about the relationship of the Council with the Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology. Although most members registered agreement or strong

agreement that the relationship was good, one said, *“There is generally-speaking a good relationship. However, letters and requests to senior ministerial officials have elicited no responses, and Council’s concerns about the “roles and mandates” exercise undertaken by the Ministry have so far been ignored.”* and another commented, *“Ministry seems to have little understanding of Council’s work, wanting to pass off quality issues as someone else’s concern.”*

Stakeholder Questionnaire

Stakeholders were generally also satisfied, but less so than members. Most felt the Council is effective, with some caveats. A stakeholder commented, *“I believe it is effective for approved degrees but I am not certain how it pertains to existing degrees. We have been delivering degrees for a number of years and do I now make the assumption that the quality is in question?”*

The assistance of the Secretariat in the process was recognized. As one stakeholder representative put it, *“We can always depend on the director to give us clear informal feedback before we formally apply for program approval. This saves everyone time and expense and provides insight into the possible issues so they can be addressed.”*

Council workload was seen by some as a source of delays. One comment was, *“I understand the pressure that the CAQC is under given the number of degree proposals, but it takes time to get the reviews done. The CAQC needs more staff.”*

An area of concern was the slowness of the approval process, and comments were made about the relationship between the Council and the Ministry, with three stakeholders disagreeing that the Council has been able to maintain an appropriate level of independence. Suggestions were made for streamlining the process.

Comparable Questions

On four questions that were very similar between the two questionnaires, a comparison of responses showed that both groups agreed that the Council is effective. Council’s chair was also seen as effective by both groups, but somewhat less strongly by stakeholders. Stakeholders are more positive on the effectiveness of the communications strategies, but more skeptical than members on the independence of Council from the Ministry.

Conclusions

The level of satisfaction with the CAQC and its Secretariat is high for both members and stakeholders, but generally somewhat higher for members. The work of the Secretariat is highly regarded by both Council members and stakeholders, although stakeholders have a strong perception that the Secretariat needs more resources.

*Executive Summary prepared by David A. Wasserman, PhD, for the
Campus Alberta Quality Council, March 4, 2008*

Campus Alberta Quality Council Action Plan

The goal of the three-year Action Plan is to continue to build on the Council's and Secretariat's perceived areas of strength and best practices, as well as to introduce improvements in areas identified in the Review report and in Council's discussions of it.

Action Plan Strategies for Building on the Areas of Strength and Best Practices

I. Areas of strength

Although others were noted, the primary areas of strength identified in the Review report include the:

- level of understanding of their responsibility as members of Council;
- appreciation by Council members for the support they are receiving from the Secretariat;
- strong working relationships and mutual respect between and among Council members and Secretariat staff;
- appreciation by Council members for the diversity of perspectives within Council and the respect which is shown for differing points of view;
- high level of satisfaction with the internal relationships among Council members and the quality of thought, research and cooperation that goes into Council's decisions;
- the perception of stakeholders that Council work is consistent with its mandate;
- appreciation by members and stakeholders for the effective and efficient leadership of Council's Chair;
- appreciation by members and stakeholders for the dedicated, effective manner in which the Secretariat staff members are carrying out their roles; and
- positive working relationships between the Secretariat and degree-granting institutions.

In order to build on this foundation of strength and to make further enhancements, Council and its Secretariat will undertake the following:

- Ensure that all Council members have a members' handbook which provides up-to-date documentation outlining roles, responsibilities and expectations for Council members, as well as Secretariat staff roles and responsibilities;
- Review the introductory and ongoing orientation for new members on Council, with a view to possible enhancements;
- Allocate time on each meeting's agenda for the Chair and Council members:
 - to share feedback in regard to the work of the Director and Secretariat staff;
 - to reflect on the meeting, provide feedback to Council's Chair and offer suggestions for the "good of the Council";
 - to continue the current practice of providing a Chair and Secretariat report.
- Review Council's mandate and guiding principles annually to ensure that the mandate and responsibilities of Council are clearly articulated and understood;
- Reflect on what is working well and develop new strategies for maintaining and enhancing working relationships with the degree-granting institutions. To this end, Council should continue to hold its meetings at various locations across the province, and the Secretariat should continue to work facilitatively with institutions;
- Consider holding meetings with student stakeholder groups.

II. Best practices

The best practices identified in the Review report include the following:

- making decisions that are consistent with system standards and complementary to system coordination reviews;
- dealing with key quality issues;
- arranging for appropriate experts to sit on panels for organizational and program assessments;
- reviewing proposals in the order in which full documentation is received; and
- utilizing differentiated processes for different types of proposals.

In order to maintain and enhance the best practices identified in the Review report Council and the Secretariat will undertake the following:

- Review information-gathering and decision-making processes related to Ministry and Council reviews to ensure that the processes are streamlined and complementary;
- Continue to conduct environmental scanning to identify key quality issues and develop, where warranted, appropriate initiatives to address quality issues;
- Complete Campus Alberta Quality Council's policy and procedures handbook, to be posted on-line;
- Continue to use external peer evaluators, including those from outside Alberta, for its organizational, program, and comprehensive reviews and maintain a list of appropriate experts to serve in this capacity;
- Continue to expect the Secretariat to serve in an advisory capacity to external review teams.

Future Directions to Assure and Enhance Quality

As a result of its reflections on the outcomes of the Three-Year Review, Council has developed the following strategies and initiatives to improve the effectiveness of its work and to address some of the concerns raised by its members and stakeholders:

1. Council will continue aligning its work with the Ministry by enhancing ongoing communication with the Minister, Deputy Minister and Ministry staff and by ensuring that the work, issues and challenges of Council are understood and appreciated. Specifically,
 - Council will continue to provide its input and perspective on important Ministry policy initiatives such as the *Roles and Mandates Policy Framework*;
 - Council will develop strategies to strengthen its collaborative work with Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT); and
 - Council's Chair will meet regularly with the Minister and Deputy Minister to provide information on the work of Council and to maintain open lines of communication.
2. Council and its Secretariat will work with Ministry staff to develop strategies for streamlining the system coordination review and CAQC review processes and encourage the Ministry to ensure that staffing levels are adequate to deal with requests and proposals effectively and in a timely manner.
3. Council's Chair, on behalf of Council, will strive to ensure that Council and the Secretariat have sufficient and appropriate resources to fulfill their responsibilities.
4. Council, while acknowledging its mandate, will re-affirm the importance of its principle that Council maintain an appropriate degree of independence from the Ministry.

5. Council will continue working with the Alberta Universities Association and the Ministry on the pilot project for dealing expeditiously with changes to existing degrees and proposals for new degrees, with a view to streamlining the process.
6. Time at meetings and the annual retreat will continue to be allocated for discussions of what is working well and suggestions for improvement in regard to meetings and the work of Council.
7. Continuing education for Council members will become a focus.
8. A high priority will be placed on continuing talks with counterparts in other provinces to develop common practices and standards, with the goal of enhancing mutual recognition of degree programs among jurisdictions in Canada. Specifically, Council's Secretariat will continue to work with the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC), British Columbia's Degree Quality Assessment Board (DQAB), the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO) and other agencies with mandates associated with post-secondary education.
9. Council will communicate its role in improvement of quality degree programming as well as assessment of quality.
10. Council will continue to maintain an interest in the quality assurance of off-campus and international degree programs.
11. Council will continue to publish its Annual Report as a way of tracking its progress in accomplishing its key priorities and as its main communication vehicle for reporting its major accomplishments.
12. In recognition of Council's fifth anniversary, consideration will be given to the possibility of hosting a national conference in Alberta in 2009 to promote shared expectations, common standards and operational consistency among counterparts of the Campus Alberta Quality Council across Canada.