A Review of the External Processes Related to Assessing Quality of New Undergraduate Academic Programming in Canadian Universities

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Abstract
Quality assurance (QA) processes oversee programmatic creation and cyclical reviews to ensure the quality of academic programming for students. In Canada, university oversight, including funding and QA, takes place at the provincial level. Oversight of quality varies dramatically across regions in Canada, from government ministries to arm's-length quality assurance agencies to internal university governance. Our research compares the guiding documents of Canadian QA agencies from across Canada to answer the questions: (1) How do external QA procedures vary in provinces across Canada, and (2) Is financial viability considered in QA? Our results suggest a distinct lack of specificity in multiple areas, most profoundly in the financial considerations. Consequently, in the fifth section, and based on our findings, we propose a *Financial Viability and Sustainability Framework for Quality Assurance* (FVSF-QA) as a tool for supporting consideration of financial viability and stability in quality assurance.

Keywords: Higher Education, quality assurance, financial viability and sustainability, university, government

Introduction
Over the last decade, the sustainability of Higher Education (HE) in Canada has been routinely called into question as institutions report struggles to maintain financial viability amidst changing government funding mandates and student enrollment patterns (Crawley, 2023). An extreme example of these challenges can be seen at Laurentian University (Laurentian) in Ontario, Canada. In 2021, in an unprecedented move in the public HE sectors in Canada, Laurentian filed for insolvency because of immense financial struggles (CBC News, 2021b). Contributing factors at Laurentian were suggested to be related to declining international student enrollments, tuition freezes, and circumstances related to COVID-19 (Moodie, 2021).

Prior to entering insolvency and addressing the mounting financial challenges, Laurentian's administration attempted to eliminate under-enrolled academic programs through internal governance mechanisms; this approach was contested by faculty and failed (CBC News, 2020). Ultimately, more than 58 undergraduate and 11 graduate programs were eliminated in a closed Senate session (CBC News, 2021a), and additionally, 100 faculty positions were eliminated. In the absence of a declaration of

insolvency, the efforts to make programmatic changes were challenging. A recent report highlighted numerous challenges at Laurentian, not the least of which were concerns related to institutional governance (Lysyk, 2022). Laurentian's inability to critically evaluate programs that were not thriving is not unique. Our earlier research showed that universities struggle to find ways to consider or even discuss programs that no longer attract enrollment but continue to absorb resources (Kotsopoulos et al., 2021). Quality assurance (QA) processes may be helpful in such instances.

QA processes oversee programmatic creation and cyclical reviews to ensure the quality of academic programming for students. For this paper, "quality" is defined broadly as a program seen as having a sound plan of study for students, including plans for progression, learning outcomes, degree expectations, library resources, human resources for teaching, student support, demographic demand, and so forth. Quality is undoubtedly compromised when resources are constrained; thus, a consideration of financial resourcing would be reasonable. Additionally, a program that no longer has enrollment demand may be seen as compromised in terms of quality. QA can reflect both governmental policies related to HE and the internal institutional policies shaped by unique internal cultures and priorities (e.g., experiential learning opportunities, embedding principles of equity, diversity, and inclusion, regional employment needs, research, etc.). QA may be a key lever for ensuring programmatic quality and the long-term sustainability of programs and universities.

In Canada, university oversight, including funding and QA, takes place at the provincial level (cf. federal or national oversight). Oversight of quality varies dramatically across regions in Canada, from government ministries to arm's-length quality assurance agencies (QAAs) to only internal university governance. Approval of a program may, in some jurisdictions, be separate from the government funding decision for the program. For example, in Ontario, an approved program determined to be of good quality by the arm's-length QAAs may not receive funding from the provincial government. In these instances, institutions may choose to offer these programs in a quasi-private model where tuition is unrestricted and set by the institution. These programs are also typically not eligible for government student loans. The extent and nature to which QA processes for universities vary within Canada are unknown. In this research, we focus specifically on QA related to the creation of new undergraduate programs.

We base this research on the framework of punctuated equilibrium theory (True et al., 2007), which hypothesizes that organizations often undergo long periods of stability and minor changes, with punctuated periods of large change that shock the organization. Financial constraints are one example of punctuated change. Financial constraints are often related to lower enrollment and, thus, lower revenue. QA potentially serves as a tool that can help universities make or prevent small changes during periods of stability to better situate them to endure periods of massive change. Recognizing the difficulty that comes with substantially changing or eliminating academic programs once they are implemented, this research is interested in the ways that QA provides oversight and support during periods of stability to be resilient against periods of punctuated change.

The guiding questions for this research are: (1) How do external QA procedures vary in provinces across Canada, and (2) Is financial viability considered in QA? For this research, viability is the financial means necessary to launch a new program. Viability then could include both direct (e.g., salaries) and indirect costs (e.g., library resources, facilities, student support, etc.). Sustainability refers to the financial components that demonstrate the stability of the program at its full implementation. In both cases, we assume that these terms refer to a "break-even" point where a program is not operating at a loss or a profit. It could be that the assessment of viability initially does not demonstrate a break-even point, but a longer-term analysis of sustainability reveals that potential. At the very least, the necessary financial constraints, potential subsidizations, and commitments are made transparent to the department, faculty, university, and potentially the government. This research focuses on financial viability as an aspect of QA. Financial sustainability will be addressed in the recommendations and conclusions.

While we focus on Canada, the results and implications are applicable internationally. Our policy analysis utilizes a research-informed coding scheme of best practices from the QA literature and guidance provided by experience in the QA process by those on the research team. This research is an outgrowth of our past work on prioritization and program administration at Canadian universities (Kotsopoulos et al., 2021) through the lens of provincial-level programmatic development.

This paper proceeds in six parts. Firstly, we present our theoretical framework of Punctuated Equilib-

rium Theory (True et al., 2007), which reveals the importance of well-developed rigorous QA processes in program development as universities look to situate themselves well for periods of rapid change. Secondly, we present a literature review on the QA processes by looking specifically at internal and external QAAs. Thirdly, we present our methods and the iterative process of code development for QA policies. Fourth, we present our results, which suggest a general lack of specificity in QA policies and procedures to guide programmatic development at the institutional level and discuss the implications of the research for QA in Canada and abroad.

Our results suggest a distinct lack of specificity in multiple areas – most profoundly in the financial considerations. Consequently, in the fifth section, and based on our findings, we propose a *Financial Viability and Sustainability Framework for Quality Assurance* (FVSF-QA) as a tool for both QAAs and institutions. The tool draws from the literature and the extensive and interdisciplinary experience of the research team in program development, leadership, governance, university budgeting, and quality assurance oversight. The sixth section is our conclusion, summarizing recommendations, limitations, and future areas of further research.

Theoretical Framework

We base our research on the theoretical framework of punctuated equilibrium theory as it connects to QA. This theory proposes that organizational change is largely characterized by long periods of small changes and stability, with punctuations of short episodes of rapid and massive changes that overhaul a system (True et al., 2007). Periods of stability and then episodes of massive change are characteristics of the HE sector (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Miller & Friesen, 1984). HE changes can be punctuated by periods of rapid change and can be a result of changes to demographics such as international student demand, programmatic needs and changes, reductions in government funding per student, changes to internal senior administration members, or major world events such as the recent COVID-19 pandemic.

Importantly, the gradual changes that occur during the longer periods of stability can potentially result in more meaningful changes and produce more effective results rather than simply reacting to external pressures and changes, which may be ineffective, especially when oversight and consultation are limited as a result of the quick turnaround that may be required (Gersick, 1991). Furthermore, during periods of stability, where a lack of punctuation does not necessitate change, there can be limited adaptation, even in response to evidence that may encourage change (Givel, 2010; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018).

In HE, it is important to recognize that change is inevitable. As things like institutional priorities, research interests, labour market demands, job readiness, student interests, and so forth shift, so too potentially does the institution. These shifts could impact university programming. Universities may struggle with effecting change even in periods when doing so is necessary, as was seen with Laurentian; consequently, readiness to implement change during periods of equilibrium is necessary. If universities can make small changes to adapt their offerings throughout periods of stability, they may be more resilient against punctuations of rapid change. QA may support universities for episodes of punctuated equilibrium when there may be a need to engage in comprehensive evaluations of programs to ensure that they are viable and sustainable, as well as meeting the thresholds of academic quality.

Literature Review

We sort this section into two key themes: the role of external QAAs (either arm's-length or government-based) and the role of internal institutional QAAs. Both internal and external QAAs have a pivotal and symbiotic role in ensuring the viability and sustainability of programs, and ultimately, universities.

Numerous articles have discussed the role of external accrediting agencies, whether they are arms-length QA organizations or government organizations that focus on QA. The existing research, consistent with our application, has defined external QAAs broadly. These can and do look different across regions, yet serve a similar purpose of providing oversight for institutions. External QAAs can include government ministries, arm's-length government-supported agencies, or consortiums of universities that provide QA guidance for consistency across the region. The common defining characteristic has been the separation from individual institutions and oversight responsibilities, where external QAAs do not implement QA directly but rather provide guidance, policies, or procedures for institutions. Key

trends in the literature have included the need for QAAs to (a) motivate rather than merely implement sweeping QA criteria, (b) serve as intermediaries and translators of regional and governmental policy, (c) support institutions in implementing these policies, and (d) provide review and approvals. Notably, government funding may or may not be linked to the QA process. The above criteria can be implemented in various ways.

Firstly, external QA processes can both help and hinder the translation of QA to the institutional level. Policy from external sources, such as government policy (i.e., HE, internationalization, economic, etc.), if unclear, can negatively impact QA practices as institutions attempt to match or ignore ineffective policy and financial metrics (Capano, 2014). External accrediting bodies, however, can also have the benefit of supporting QA processes (Bejan et al., 2015; Bokayev et al., 2022). External oversight from these groups in the form of activities such as impact assessments on universities' own QA processes can result in better programming (Damian et al., 2015; Hanh, 2020). Necessarily, though, external QAAs should play an intermediary role, where they also support universities in understanding overarching government agendas and the broader nature of QA processes rather than simply dictating policy to the institutions (Dill, 2010). Fulfilling this intermediary role requires external QAAs to serve the universities by providing information on effective academic operations and organizational structures or even information on international processes (El-Khawas, 2013), or assistance in connecting universities with the local community in their QA process (Kakembo & Barymak, 2017). The ultimate goal of QAAs is not to turn into a rubber-stamping entity but rather to be a body that advances and assesses quality in academic programming and translates government goals and objectives.

Secondly, external QAAs must strike a balance between promoting QA practices and supporting, motivating, and strengthening the internal practices of institutions. The balance of this role can include training and information on the necessity of the process and specific cultural shifts towards the inclusion of explicit approaches to QA (Naidoo, 2013). This step is the crucial difference between being an oversight body that only provides guidance and frameworks and being a body that encourages reflection with feedback that serves to advance programmatic quality and effectiveness (Kadhila & Iipumbu, 2019). Such ineffective actions can, for example, take the form of focusing heavily on the measurement of organizational success or implementation of programs rather than focusing on supporting institutional ownership of QA (Nicholson, 2011). Such practices can be especially damaging in the case of regions that may not have standardized QA processes, where the strengthening of QAAs can be a benefit to education in the region (Tavara, 2021). To do so requires appropriate filters to ensure that the programs and policies are clear and easily implemented and not simply performative (Mgaiwa & Ishengoma, 2017). This guidance and training for institutional ownership may be especially true in the case of financial considerations, where the inclusion of these components must be specific and actionable, yet are often underdeveloped in QA considerations (Ilyasov et al., 2023).

In recognition of the need for universities to make small and measured changes during periods of equilibrium (Givel, 2010; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018), external QAAs may provide information on how considerations including changing demographics, programmatic needs, and finance may be conducted through capacity building, training, or resource dissemination. QAAs could allow universities to avoid the sharpest reforms during periods of intense punctuated change, as the considerations are built into the process of program creation and review.

In contrast to external QAAs, internal institutional QAAs take ownership of the QA process (Stura et al., 2019). Similar to external QAAs, internal processes can be different, with some institutions having formal offices and others using ad-hoc committee structures to review and approve academic offerings. Key trends in the literature on institutional QA focus on the need for institutional ownership coming from various sources, such as academic units, students, and QA offices, with some standardization through policy (Stura et al., 2019).

Institutional QA can take a variety of forms. For example, self-studies, where institutions evaluate their programming holistically to identify strengths, needs, and areas for growth, have been found to help institutions become more aware of their goals and subsequent resource allocation than any government regulation (Kolomitro et al., 2022). Institutional QA is especially important when developing programs and deciding where to allocate resources.

Regular reporting of internal QAAs to leadership (Bendermacher et al., 2017; Matear, 2021) and

inclusion of all stakeholders (i.e., administrators, faculty, and students) in QA decisions (Haapakorpi, 2011) can lead to greater institutional accountability (Parvin, 2019). Such reporting processes integrate stakeholders, especially students, in organization-level QA decisions throughout the processes of program development rather than being integrated at the end when a full proposal is readied for approval and implementation (Parvin, 2019). For example, the dedicated involvement of students throughout program review cycles and self-studies (Ahmad & Ahmed, 2023; Matear, 2021), rather than the mere insertion of student course evaluations, could prevent student program goals and institutional expectations from being misaligned (Groen, 2021).

The potential variability across internal QAAs demonstrates the possible need for some standardization and the need to create need-defined institutional QA policies, processes, and roles (Mengquan et al., 2016). Policies provide a starting point for programs to align their own needs with the needs of the institution as they develop new programs and think through what a successful program might look like (Bowker, 2017). Institutional ownership walks a fine line between creating space for policies by creating a culture of QA (Ntim, 2014) and implementing policies or systems that are performative (Blackmur, 2010; Davis, 2017). The latter can result in gatekeeping while going through the motions of assessing quality (Rowlands, 2012, 2013). A focus on procedures and implementation of policies rather than trying to ensure that value is created through QA may prevent it from being most effective (Huisman & Westerheijden, 2010; Rowlands, 2012; Tetteh et al., 2021).

For institutional ownership, then, the context of punctuated equilibrium in the QA process should come up in similar yet unique ways. The emphasis on the various external considerations, including changes to demographics and/or student demand, programmatic needs, and financial considerations (i.e., viability and sustainability) at this level should be more pronounced, given the more direct impact of financial changes on university programming.

The literature review highlighted a major gap in research and recommendations related to financial considerations. The lack of consideration of financial viability and sustainability in the QA research may reflect that typically finance and academic quality have been separate and even unrelated considerations. However, before universities are faced with financial constraints and indeed instances of punctuated equilibrium (Givel, 2010; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018), considering the viability and sustainability of programs is crucial. If financial viability is not included during the proposal and approval stages of new programs, it becomes difficult to determine their impact on the university's operating budget. If financial sustainability is not considered when programs are reviewed, the same challenge persists. Our intention is not to argue that programs only have value insofar as they turn a profit, but rather the opposite. Programs can bring value in terms of quality academics, reputation or intellectual creation, and institutional values, and may sometimes sacrifice short- and long-term financial gains to achieve this.

The lack of consideration of any financials in the QA process can be problematic. Identifying the financial break-even point for a program can provide transparent planning parameters and allow for appropriate resourcing. Transparency is necessary, particularly when other programs or units are required to provide funding allocations (often referred to as cross-subsidization or subventions) to a program for financial viability or sustainability. Especially in the context of punctuated equilibrium (True et al., 2007), building in financial evaluations early and throughout the QA process can provide universities with a mechanism to make small changes to programs, allowing them to be adaptable rather than requiring a massive overhaul of programs during periods of punctuated change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Miller & Friesen, 1984).

Methodology

This research employs a comparative approach to examine QA policies and procedures across Canadian universities, focusing specifically on approvals of new undergraduate program development in publicly-assisted universities. We focus on the creation of new undergraduate programs as instances of gradual changes in the context of punctuated equilibrium theory, where the decision to create and approve new programs has important longer-term implications. If universities take advantage of periods of stability to make smaller changes that align with their goals, they will be better set up for success than if they are required to later react to a period of punctuated equilibrium (True et al., 2007). In this context, the ways that the creation of new programs is undertaken through external QAAs is of crucial importance.

Provinces included in the analysis were chosen through the following criteria: 1) The region had

an external QAA, 2) their QA frameworks or similar policies were publicly available, and 3) these policies represented QA processes that oversee the creation of new undergraduate programs by a provincial authority in Canada. We included five Canadian provinces/regions in this research, namely Alberta, British Columbia, the Maritimes (including Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island), Saskatchewan, and Ontario, to explore how QA policies and procedures vary across the country. The Maritimes are grouped in this way because there is one coordinated external QAA that oversees this region, the Maritimes Provinces Higher Education Commission (MPHEC). In the case of Saskatchewan, the University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan are exempt from approvals of the province's QA board.

Document Collection

Policies that included the process of overseeing the creation of new undergraduate programs were collected from each QAA's website. For every province except Saskatchewan, one policy was included, but due to the governance of undergraduate program creation in Saskatchewan being divided into two policies, both were included for analysis. Documents were systematically collected and time-stamped by research assistants during the period of September-October 2023. The time stamping assures that the analysis was relevant for the period of time in which the data was collected. While universities often have their internal processes, we focused exclusively on external QAAs' policies as the baseline for what universities must do in proposing new programs.

Document Analysis

Our analysis of these policies proceeded in two stages. First, we employed a deductive coding methodology (Altheide et al., 2008), applying codes that were pre-established based on insights gained from the above literature review. The initial codes, rooted in the literature, were strategically chosen to encompass key aspects of "quality" as evidenced in the QA policies. We base the conceptualization of these codes on the theoretical orientation of punctuated equilibrium, keeping in mind the role that these documents play in guiding institutional changes as small adaptations in periods of normality (Gersick, 1991). As such, situate the QA process as a way to prepare for and prevent the worst outcome from a period of punctuated equilibrium. For example, financial considerations in program development allow universities to determine if the program is viable and to give sober thought to how it can be sustained during a period of equilibrium so that when a period of punctuated change occurs, the program and institution are prepared. This provided a structured foundation for the systematic analysis of documents (see Table 1). The initial codes were systematically applied to the collected policies.

Transitioning to the second stage, we utilised an inductive coding approach. Additional codes were added because patterns and themes that were not fully captured by the initial set of predefined codes emerged as the documents were being reviewed. Our approach to code formulation in the deductive stage ensured a focused examination of key aspects of QA policies, while the inductive stage allowed for adaptability, and a more detailed exploration of the multifaceted QA landscape. This iterative process enriched the coding framework, ensuring that the analysis remained responsive to the complexity in QA policies. To ensure reliability of findings, each policy was coded by two separate reviewers. Each code was reviewed, and codes were revised where relevant to ensure accuracy (see Table 2).

Table 1
Initial Codes

Heading	Code	Description
Stakeholder consultation	Stakeholder Consultation	Was there any requirement to share plans provincially with HE leaders?
	Stakeholder Consultation Early	Were these leaders consulted early in the institutional process?
	Stakeholder Consultation Late	Were these leaders consulted after the internal process was completed
	Stakeholder Informed (public posting, sharing by letter)	Are the results posted publicly or shared by letter
Finances	Financial Modelling Performative (no actual projects)	Some narrative
	Finance Required	Template provided and submitted
	Additional resources included in modelling	Other financial considerations such as faculty, facilities and implications for other programs
Government Consultation	Government Consultation Required	Does the proposal need to go to government for approval in any way
	Government Consultation Informal	Indication of early informal discussions important
	Government Consultation Early	Government approval at the beginning of even the institutional process as part of the formalized process
	Government Consultation Late/last	Government approval at the beginning of even the institutional process as part of the formalized process
Review Process	Review process frequency	How often are cyclical reviews conducted?
	Review process purpose	Why is the review conducted? Financials?
Other	Sustainability	Reference to ESG principles, UN SDGs or other sustainability metrics
	EDI	Did the proposal required an EDI component?
	Indigenous	Did the proposal require reconciliation measures?
	QA Transparency	Are the provincial guidelines clear and available publicly?
	External Expert Review	External experts required for evaluating the program

Table 2
Final Codes

Heading	Code	Description
Stakeholder consultation (how are stakeholders considered to capitalize on periods of equilibrium?)	Stakeholder Consultation	Was there any requirement to share plans provincially with HE leaders?
	Stakeholder Consultation Indirect	Do universities have to just post the application online rather than reach out?
	Stakeholder Consultation Early	Were these leaders consulted early in the institutional process?
	Stakeholder Consultation Late	Were these leaders consulted after the internal process was completed
	QA Transparency	Are the provincial guidelines clear and available publicly?
	External Expert Review	External experts required for evaluating the program
	Stakeholder Informed (public posting, sharing by letter)	Are the results posted publicly or shared by letter
Finances (how are finances considered to fine tune programs during equilibrium?)	Financial Modelling Performative (no actual projects)	Some narrative
	Finance Required	Template provided and submitted
	Additional resources included in modelling	Other financial considerations such as faculty, facilities and implications for other programs
Government Consultation (how is government consultation implemented to fine tune between universities during equilibrium?)	Government Consultation Required	Does the proposal need to go to government for approval in any way
	Government Consultation Informal	Indication of early informal discussions important
	Government Consultation Early	Government approval at the beginning of even the institutional process as part of the formalized process
	Government Consultation Late/last	Government approval at the beginning of even the institutional process as part of the formalized process
Internal Governance, Procedures and Review (how do various governance processes maintain resilience against punctuated change?)	Environmental Scan	Was a scan of other programs across the country completed?
	Review process frequency	How often are cyclical reviews conducted?
	Review process purpose	Why is the review conducted? Financials?
	Self Study in Development	Do universities require a self-study in the development of a program
	Self study in program review	Do universities require a self-study in the review of a program
	Internal governance review	Do they require an internal governance structure review
	Implementation plan	Is an implementation plan required for consideration?
	Student Consultation	Was there a requirement to include students in the coding
EDI-D/Sustainability (how are EDI-D/Sustainability considerations incorporated in periods of equilbrium?)	Sustainability	Reference to ESG principles, UN SDGs or other sustainability metrics
	EDI	Did the proposal required an EDI component?
	Indigenous	Did the proposal require reconciliation measures?

Results and Discussion

Results are presented in the six coding categories: stakeholder consultation; government/external consultation; internal governance procedures and review; Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization (EDI-D) and Sustainability; quality control audit process; and financial. Each of these sections represents an analysis of provincial QA policies organized around key components described in the literature and our guiding framework of punctuated equilibrium theory. Recognizing that our work evaluates strictly the policies of provincial QAAs, we adapt the literature on QA at the institutional level to explore how QAAs external to the university might provide policies and guidance on effective QA to support institutional integration. For clarity in the process and methods, we include a discussion across all areas that were coded. We conclude with a recommendation specific to a principal gap in QAA policy and procedures regarding the consideration of financial viability and sustainability.

Internal QAAs/Institutional Governance

The institutional requirements for demonstrating internal capacity are perhaps the most consistent in QA. In British Columbia, universities are able to apply for temporary approvals to commence a program where they can demonstrate internal QA and bypass the normal QA procedures. What this means is that, in some cases, internal governance is sufficient.

Environmental scans of similar programs are only required in the Maritimes. Internal review requirements, implementation plans, and self-studies are required as part of program proposals in four of five provinces. For all newly approved programs, expectations that there will be a review of the program within 5-8 years following initial enrollment are consistent in every region except Saskatchewan. In Ontario, this review is in addition to a progress report requested from the program after the first few years of implementation. The purpose of these reviews varies, with British Columbia and Alberta requiring a self-study, Ontario requiring internal reporting to the external QAA, and the Maritimes requiring an external review. Interestingly, despite the variance across the rest of the sections, the requirements for internal evaluations and reviews are relatively consistent across provinces.

This focus on developing institutional capacity shows a clear understanding by provincial QAAs of the need to develop institutional accountability and dedicated processes to the benefit of the overall success of QA. These oversight policies and procedures serve to create an environment wherein institutions can review the smaller changes made, where necessary, to prevent more seismic changes during periods of punctuated change (True et al., 2007). As past research on punctuated equilibrium has highlighted, however, there can be a consistent lack of change in periods of equilibrium (Givel, 2010; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018), and such oversight and review procedures serve as a mechanism to create space for such ongoing adaptation. Creating internal capacity and QA processes can result in institutions being more aware of their own needs and programming capacity than if it were to come externally (Kolomitro et al., 2022), and can result in the inclusion of more stakeholders in the QA processes (Haapakorpi, 2011). While this institutional ownership over QA is positive and the requirements for institutions rather than external QAAs to drive QA in program development is a strength, the possibility of variability between institutions leaves room for external QAAs to play a leadership role by clarifying context and providing resources regarding specific QA practices. This form of leadership would provide consistency throughout the provinces on standards and develop capacity for successful internal QA.

Stakeholder Consultation

Each QAA examined encourages some form of stakeholder consultation as well as an external expert review in program development. The only region that mentioned early consultation with stakeholders is Ontario; however, this was not a requirement, and rather, it is at the discretion of universities how they will involve external stakeholders (e.g., faculty, students, community members) in new program development.

In most other regions, stakeholder consultation is required but not necessarily specified as to when or how in the process it must be included; instead, it is simply stated that consultation must be included. For example, Alberta noted that “Consultation with stakeholders is an integral part of degree program development, appraisal, and monitoring” (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2013, p. 13), and British Columbia highlighted that “the institution must demonstrate that it has consulted appro-

priate individuals and organizations in the development of the program proposal" (Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training & the Degree Quality Assessment Board, 2017, p. 31). The other end of the spectrum is the Maritimes, which explicitly notes that stakeholder feedback is sought after the program is developed, where a full proposal is circulated for comment prior to being approved. For example, other universities are invited to give feedback on a program.

The requirement by external QAAs for institutional engagement with students and all stakeholders early in the process, for example, in self-study processes and new program proposals in program development (Matear, 2021), could result in more meaningful consultation and program development. This kind of fine-tuning during periods of equilibrium would better position universities to be resilient against periods of punctuated change by understanding the needs of those most impacted by a program (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997). In most cases, the inclusion of students is required for consultation in the process, but the format varies; however, this is not the case for British Columbia. For example, student course evaluation surveys have been used as a substitute for student input into QA. While some institutions with less specificity on stakeholder consultation may still perform these consultations on their own (Heath et al., 2021), external QAAs serve an important role in providing resources and guidance to institutions on how they might perform these consultations, particularly if they lack the capacity to do so themselves. Such resources and guidance could ensure consistency in the way in which stakeholder feedback is included.

Government Consultation

With the exceptions noted earlier for Saskatchewan, the consultation on program approval comes at the end of the QA process. While informal conversations may occur with the government prior to programs being developed, no province requires such a meeting or conversation to occur to provide informal feedback on the early stages of a program's development. The closest to early consultation with the government is a formal early submission required in Alberta. In this submission, the institution must submit their rationale for the program in line with their strategic plans, an analysis of similar programs at other institutions in Alberta, and a budget model. This is circulated amongst other Alberta institutions for comment and feedback, and then returns to the university for the submission of the full application.

In other regions, government consultation comes at the end of the process; for example, in the Maritimes, "once the appropriate governing bodies (normally the Senate or equivalent and the Board of Governors) have approved the new, modified, or terminated program proposal" (Maritime Provinces Higher Education Commission, 2013, p. 8). In other regions, such as Ontario, consultation with the government is only required in cases where there are funding implications. This process is similar in all other provinces, where institutional members first develop and review the program in its entirety before it is sent to the external QAA. The challenge is the massive resources and time required to put together a program application at the institutional level. Especially, as is noted under internal governance, programs are not often required to conduct an environmental scan, meaning that government oversight of the overlap of programs might not occur until after a program is fully developed or at all.

The lack of inclusion of government until the end of a QAA process, or limited throughout the process, does afford institutions significant autonomy. However, as in the case of Ontario, if funding for the new program is contingent on government approval, engagement at the end, when the decisions may vary or be delayed, makes planning and implementing new programs challenging for institutions. The submission of programs to the government at the end of the program development process means that the government often has less say in the development of programs and can run the danger of being performative in its function (Mgaiwa & Ishengoma, 2017) or providing feedback late in the process when programs have already had significant resources spent on their development. It also risks programs being developed without appropriate cross-region comparison in periods of stability (Givel, 2010; Kuhlmann & van der Heijden, 2018), which is important to prevent risk during periods of intense punctuated change. QAAs can play a facilitation role in helping institutions understand government objectives and regulations in ways that allow for them to be implemented in the QA process (Dill, 2010).

EDI-D/Sustainability

For Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Decolonization (EDI-D) and Sustainability (termed here as environmental and social sustainability rather than financial sustainability as we refer to it in this paper), we

sought to evaluate how the consideration of these components at the provincial level QA policies were integrated. Alberta and Ontario were the only regions to mention EDI-D. For Alberta, it is referred to as a broad organizational objective rather than a requirement within the program development process. In Ontario, it is mentioned as something institutions may consider as it aligns with their own institutional goals. For BC and Saskatchewan, broad terms like social goals are mentioned but not necessarily required in program development. Considerations for Indigenous groups and practices were mentioned but in relation to requirements for professional teacher education programs and in-school practicums.

Overall, while there has not been significant literature on EDI-D in QA processes, the lack of consideration and mention of EDI-D by the provincial levels may illustrate a lack of capacity to integrate these considerations more widely or more nuanced approaches in actual learning objectives within programs. The latter is not a requirement by any of the QAAs. Especially as institutions increasingly recognize the role of EDI-D in their strategic plans, external QAAs can provide meaningful considerations for the integration of EDI-D into program development to help institutions move this beyond a performative component.

Quality Control Audit

Three of the QAAs evaluated—BC, Alberta, and Ontario—audited university QA processes based on their own set of principles. In each of these regions, universities have the autonomy to set the criteria and are then evaluated based on the goals they have set for themselves. In the case of Saskatchewan, universities are audited by the QAAs on their alignment with pre-set QA principles, with the goal being explicitly to ensure that institutions agree on the terms of authorization and principles and to have an external body conduct this evaluation. For the Maritimes, the audit process is done entirely internally, with the QAAs having an oversight role. Each audit process incorporates both external oversight and internal ownership, giving universities a valuable role in the audit process as the literature on QA supports (Nicholson, 2011) and to leverage the periods of equilibrium to minimize the challenges posed during periods of punctuated change.

The Maritimes provide an interesting framework for how QA audits may still have institutional ownership with the requirement for institutions to undertake the process on their own, with guidance and support from the QAA. Both approaches allow universities to participate in creating a broader culture of QA in the audit process of their new programs when they are launched, which is an important step to prevent more performative approaches to QA (Blackmur, 2010; Ntim, 2014).

Financial

Consideration of financial viability is where the greatest inconsistency is observed in QAA processes. In most cases, financial considerations are mentioned, but the extent to which they are required to be considered varies dramatically. For example, in the case of Ontario, new program proposals are evaluated on the "sufficiency and quality of the planned human, physical and financial resources" (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2023, p. 28). What this means specifically is discretionary. A narrative could suffice, for example. In British Columbia, the policy requires that "information that the institution considers proprietary should be included in appendices to the full program proposal. Examples of proprietary information may include referee letters, letters of support (which contain personal information such as names and addresses) and financial information" (Ministry of Advanced Education, Skills and Training & the Degree Quality Assessment Board, 2017, p. 10). While finance is mentioned in both cases, specificity is lacking. The financial viability of the program is not seen as crucial to its quality but rather appears as a minor planning criterion.

This vagueness in financial considerations across four of the provinces in this research stands in stark contrast to the case of Alberta. Their policy notes that as part of a program submission, the ministry will "examine the institution's budget plan for the program in relation to financial sustainability and implications for students and taxpayers" (Campus Alberta, 2021, p. 21), requiring financial statements to be submitted with a program proposal. Taking it one step further, Alberta requires that a financial risk assessment also be proposed with contingency plans in the case of enrollment issues or the inability to procure adequate staffing. Such financial criteria require universities to undertake scenario planning and risk analysis to demonstrate not just the ideal picture but also to plan for a worst-case scenario. In

short, both viability and financial sustainability, based on our definitions, are considered. None of this is to say that financial considerations should be taken above other considerations of quality. The approach in Alberta utilizes rigorous financial considerations as part of evaluating the quality of a program, its impact on students, and potential alignment to financial constraints and priorities within an institution.

Apart from Alberta, most provincial QAAs in our sample do not provide specific, actionable goals for financial viability. The Alberta example requires specificity in resource allocations beyond enrollment projections. When QAAs require broader considerations, such as contingency plans or assessments of sustainability to use our terms, it puts the onus on institutions to make QA considerations (Kolomitro et al., 2022), such as resource allocation for their self-study. Such requirements could result in universities integrating this into their governance practices (Mengquan et al., 2016).

Consideration of financial viability can provide an important roadmap when programs are introduced. Similarly, an assessment of financial sustainability is important when reviewed cyclically. It is an important opportunity to engage in a comparative analysis of the assumptions guiding the initiation of a new program and the evolving context at a future point in time. Given the importance of financial viability and sustainability in the ability of universities to be resilient against periods of punctuated change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Miller & Friesen, 1984), the lack of a consistent framework for considering these levers is problematic. As a method of building in more effective smaller changes as a result of periods of stability (Gersick, 1991), considerations of financial viability and sustainability are crucial in these early stages of program development to predict and prepare for the inevitable changes, and yet, with the exception of Alberta, are absent in the policies and procedures of provincial QAAs.

It is important to note that institutions may have internal policies related to financial viability and sustainability. Some universities or even specific faculties may assess the viability and sustainability model, and universities may have parallel finance committee approvals. Such processes would be outside of the required QAAs processes and outside of the scope of this review. Making such considerations transparent to the universities or governments that financially assist these universities should be considered.

Financial Viability and Sustainability Framework for QA (FVSF-QA)

While our results point to a general need for standardization across the QA process for provincial QAAs, we note, in particular, that there was a lack of consideration of the financial aspects of program development. Such a lack of consideration can be troubling given its cornerstone role in being able to survive periods of punctuated change. Take Laurentian as an example: if there were opportunities to check the financial viability at the point of new program creation or the sustainability of dwindling programs as insolvency was looming, an extreme instance of punctuated equilibrium, there might have been an opportunity for different considerations.

A key practical development from this research is the FVSF-QA. It may serve to (1) standardize approaches to examining financial considerations when assessing the quality of a new program, (2) provide a tool for evaluating initial assumptions and current contexts at cyclical reviews, and (3) better situate institutions to make smaller changes to be better positioned to respond to periods of punctuated change. By embedding financial considerations in the QA process, institutions would enable informed planning and improved alignment between academic programs and the overall fiscal health of the institution. Transparency for all stakeholders, including other departments within a unit that may be required to provide cross-subsidization subventions to values-driven academic programming, is also important.

This FVSF-QA is a full-cost accounting approach using potentially an institutionally customized Financial Viability and Sustainability Tool (FVST; Kotsopoulos et al., 2025). Full cost accounting would require transparency in areas such as funding allocations (e.g., cross-program subsidizations or subsidies), program and overhead resource needs, and proactive planning for program growth, reduction, or discontinuation. Core elements of the model are described in Table 3.

Table 3
Financial Model and Full Costing Elements

Element	Methodology for estimate
Enrollment Data	Identify new students in each intake year and the flow through as students move into years 2, 3 and 4
Revenues	
Tuition, Domestic	To support a simple model, average tuition rates can be applied to enrollment data
Tuition, International	To support a simple model, average tuition rates can be applied to enrollment data
Provincial Operating Grant	If new government grant funding is generated by additional enrollments
Ancillary/program fees	Identify other related program fees or revenues generated from new enrollments
Other revenues	Identify other new revenues generated from new enrollments
Direct Program Costs	
Personnel	
Academic faculty*	Full time salary and benefit %; prorated for % of direct program teaching, may include existing or only new additional faculty
Other Instructional	Full time or part time salary and benefits %, including instructional staff (e.g., sessional)
Teaching Assistantships	Full time or part time salary and benefits
Operating Costs	
Scholarships	Include those funded from the academic unit
Administrative Stipend	Include costing for administrative expense accounts and similar when new administrative staff are required
Support Staff	Full time or part time salary and benefits % (e.g., advising, administration, experiential learning)
Advertising and Marketing	Estimate annual cost to support promotion of program
Lab Supplies	Estimate incremental new annual costs
Equipment and Furniture	Include new or used equipment
Materials and Supplies	Include additional new costs of materials and supplies
Indirect/Institutional Level Costs (for full cost accounting)	
Library	Include requirements for acquisitions, periodicals
Scholarships/Bursaries	Include those that are funded centrally from institutional administration
Space needs charges	Include one- time new office requirements and lab space and related costs or charges
Opportunity Cost*	Include trade-offs made by offering resources in one area, for example, a decision to allocate teaching resources to one area rather than another may result in reduced revenues or result in a different cost outcome.

Element	Methodology for estimate
Indirect/Institutional Level Costs (for full cost accounting)	
Overhead Rate, Estimated Overhead, or Revenue Share*	Include estimated costs of central and shared services or amount calculated based on standard overhead rates applied from the institutional level or as a share of revenue
Program Contribution / (Loss)*	
Cross Subsidization funding allocation	Add the funding amount necessary to make the program break even so revenues equal costs, and stipulating whether the amount is from within a unit or centrally (sometimes referred to as "subvention")

*Refer to the Method of Capturing Cost section that follows for additional context.

There are several areas of program costing where there is a material cost impact at both the program and institutional levels that are susceptible to underestimation or differing interpretations. Since the non-instructional portion of faculty salary is typically funded through a university's operating budget, salary must be accounted for at the full rate, including benefits, and not limited to the portion of salary specified for teaching. Under an incremental costing method, only new instructional costs would be considered. Costs related to faculty salaries in interdisciplinary programs where course buy-outs or some more nominal transfer than faculty salary occurs should also be captured. Personnel and benefit costs are the most significant expense of faculty or university operating budgets, at 76.34% of total operating budget expenditures in 2021-22, according to the Financial Information of Universities and Colleges (FIUC) as published by the Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO, 2022).

Administrative overhead is another category of indirect costing that warrants highlighting. A broad range of services is delivered outside of academic units – from maintaining physical and information technology resources to administering student services to meeting legal and financial reporting requirements. These institutional costs must be accounted for in costing to reflect full program costs. Typically, and depending on the funding models at institutions, these costs could be an overhead cost, a revenue share, or both.

Additionally, program costing should consider institutional costs not covered by standard overhead rates that are associated with new students, whether incurred at the unit or university level. Scholarships, including academic performance-based or entrance awards, are an example of a cost that is sometimes centrally managed and subject to change, and therefore may sit outside the awareness of academic units but are an incremental cost directly connected to the delivery of programs. These costs are often one of the largest categories of expenditure for university operating budgets after personnel and benefit costs (CAUBO, 2021). Failing to incorporate these direct costs to ensure they are adequately resourced and planned for could impact the decision-making process and assumptions regarding the true financial viability and sustainability of programs.

Programming may be approved and prioritized even when costing identifies the requirement for cross-subsidization or subvention. Our recommendation is therefore to provide a fully transparent costing for programming and to identify subsidization requirements, if applicable, to support decision-making and coordination at the institutional level and to ensure financial viability and sustainability for such programs. A costing methodology that lacks this transparency of financial subsidization requirements puts programs at risk of being unfairly subject to financial oversight with potentially incorrect assumptions about their viability.

Institutional Costing Implications

Given that academic program costing represents a significant proportion of the institutional financial outcomes, it is imperative that there is financial transparency about the financial impacts of program proposals and decisions, and of the assessment of the impact of academic programs on the financial health of

an institution. Measuring the impacts of change in programming on any provincial performance-based metrics or sector standards is another opportunity for assessment and transparency. While the impacts of one program are likely to be insignificant at the university level, the impact of repeated negative impacts across programs can be substantial. The requirement for institutional decision-making across all programs, and not in isolation or to the exclusion of other programs, further supports the recommendation for financial performance measures to be included in the cyclical review process and not only at program initiation.

Importantly, viability should be considered at both the program level and full-time equivalent (FTE) student level. Consideration will provide a costing breakdown by student rather than treating the entire university as an undifferentiated body. A course, cross-program, and department-level costing could also be valuable to understand the relative cost of operation for programs and the various costing barriers. While such an approach does not address value at the broader sector level, it has the potential to be valuable in understanding the viability and sustainability of programs across an institution, and it can support the financial health of an institution more broadly. Such data can provide benchmarking, trends, and comparative data to support the long-term sustainability of programs.

A financial viability and sustainability assessment provides the opportunity for institutions to increase adaptability in times of steadiness and to minimize or smooth disruptive planning requirements through ongoing management and improved integrated planning. Depending on institutional governance structures, institutions or QAAs could request a standardized financial analysis as part of a letter of intent (LOI) ahead of the full completion of a proposal. Early consideration at the LOI stage saves on the typically enormous amount of work required for new program development, particularly if the program is shown to be nonviable. The proposed approach also allows for programs to have upfront discussions about cross-subsidization and resourcing required to be more resilient against periods of punctuated change.

Conclusions

In this research, we explored how QA policies and procedures varied across Canada. This research adds a Canadian lens to the existing QA scholarship. The results, and particularly the FVSF-QA, may be relevant to any jurisdiction, private or public sector HE institutions, including colleges and polytechnic institutes. The analysis is strengthened by the unique and collective experience of the research team, which includes researchers, academic leaders, and administrative leaders in both finance and institutional QA.

In basic terms, QA is a process that ensures students in universities are receiving quality programs. It ensures that government-funded programs are held to a level of expert scrutiny and review. Our focus in this research was on the approval of new undergraduate programs. The analysis of external QAAs revealed some consistency across provinces; there was a significant lack of specificity across key components (e.g., how stakeholders are engaged, which stakeholders provide feedback when government is involved, cyclical reviews, etc.), and a dearth of financial considerations, except for Alberta. The lack of financial considerations is problematic. We contend that quality cannot be separated from the related costs, and quality is compromised if programs lack the resources to be sustained.

While the specifics required by external QAAs in program development vary significantly by province for universities, the requirements may be overly broad and allow individual universities latitude in developing an institutional definition of quality. This lack of specificity is particularly pronounced in the case of financial considerations and the level of financial viability and sustainability that could be included as an aspect of quality.

To support QAAs and institutions in the QA process, we present the FVSF-QA to show how financial considerations might be undertaken during program development for a more effective and rigorous test, drawn from best practices in our work and combined with the research on financial considerations. The significance of this approach is noteworthy. In universities, sunsetting a program that fails to thrive or have institutional or societal relevance is extraordinarily difficult, as described earlier in the specific case of Laurentian. The ways that financial sustainability may be incorporated into cyclical reviews are an important area for future research. The proposed template tool could serve a similar purpose and allow for an assessment of the foundational assumptions at the initial development of a new course.

A limitation of this research is that we focus specifically on undergraduate program development

at universities. Notably, colleges and universities differ in Canada, which may not be the case in other countries. Typically, colleges in Canada have limited authority to grant only undergraduate degrees. In some regions in Canada, such as Ontario, the QAAs differ. Our findings are likely applicable to the QAAs overseeing new program approvals in colleges as well. However, that remains a potential area of future inquiry.

This research is based on the premise that QA guidance from the bodies that approve programs ultimately leads to institutional QA. Future research might investigate how and to what extent QA principles at the provincial level are implemented at the institutional level and the various ways that the meaning of QA policy by provincial QAAs is interpreted and enacted by institutions.

Another limitation is that our focus on financial considerations is exclusive to the QA process. Institutions may have other internal mechanisms that capture the consideration of financial viability and sustainability. This study is the forthcoming research for our team. Our preliminary review suggests limited evidence of these internal mechanisms, however.

Ultimately, to be effective, QA must be recognized as a process that is designed to support universities as they seek to achieve their goals and support effective learning in the short and long term. This process allows universities to navigate periods of punctuated change when they consider new program development in periods of equilibrium. The various societal, political, and economic implications facing various regions provide different understandings of how QA should be actioned, but, especially with regard to international best practices, some level of standardization will result in valuable QA developments across the country with policies better aligned with supporting institutions in providing high-level education to students that is sustainable. External QAAs can contribute to the development of this field by making policies more explicit and fully leveraging their capacity to serve as drivers and informers for institutions in their respective regions.

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