PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY MANAGERS AT ONTARIO COLLEGES

by © Laura Jarrell

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Abstract

A phenomenological research method, led by an "insider" researcher, was used to explore the perspectives of eight quality managers at Ontario colleges. Quality managers act as quality intermediaries by harmonizing internal and external requirements and stakeholder needs to shape quality assurance processes. As systems mature, there is a natural tension between accountability and improvement. While underrepresented in the literature, the experiences of quality managers are critical to inform the future of quality in post-secondary education, specifically related to leading and evaluating quality assurance processes and influencing quality. Reflexive thematic analysis of interviews and documents revealed a bidirectional relationship of influence between quality managers and the forces that exert influence on quality assurance, as well as four distinct themes. Quality managers *frame and enable program quality* as improvement-focused to secure buy-in and ensure the process is meaningful. Quality managers *drive program change* to legitimize quality assurance and ensure it has a positive impact on stakeholders. Quality managers *cultivate a culture of quality* by exerting influence beyond the scope of their role to connect and support institutional processes and strategies. Lastly, quality managers *seek system change* by supporting each other and looking for ways to exert collective influence at a system level.

General Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and experiences of quality managers – individuals who directly oversee quality assurance processes at post-secondary institutions. This study considers the role quality managers play in harmonizing internal and external requirements and stakeholder needs to shape quality assurance processes. An analysis of interviews and quality assurance documents revealed that quality managers not only manage all of the forces that exert influence on quality assurance in post-secondary education, but they also exert their own influence on these forces at the program, institutional, and system levels. This study illustrates how quality managers *frame and enable program quality* as improvement-focused, *drive program change* to legitimize quality assurance, *cultivate a culture of quality* by exerting influence beyond the scope of their role, and *seek system change* by supporting each other and looking for ways to exert collective influence at a system level.

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As a student of Memorial University in Newfoundland and Labrador, I acknowledge that the lands on which Memorial University's campuses are situated are in

the traditional territories of diverse Indigenous groups, and I acknowledge with respect the diverse histories and cultures of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit of this province.

As an employee of the Algonquin College in Ottawa, Ontario, I acknowledge that Algonquin College campuses are located on the traditional unceded, unsurrendered territory of the Anishinaabe Algonquin People. The Algonquin People have inhabited and cared for these lands long before today. I take this time to show my gratitude and respect to them, and to the land for all that it provides us: trees to give shade, water and food to sustain us, and paths to connect us. As a post-secondary institution, we embrace the responsibility to help ensure that the next generations of land stewards are respectful and grateful for the bounty of this land on which we all live, work, play, and study.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1   Background and Context

In post-secondary education, quality matters. Parents and students seek it, employers demand it, governments and organizations try to measure it, and institutions strive to achieve it. However, with no clear or agreed upon definition of quality in post-secondary education (Dicker et al., 2019; Elassy, 2015; Harvey, 2008; Harvey & Green, 1993; Schindler et al., 2015), it can be challenging for institutions to assess quality and identify opportunities to improve it.

Quality assurance is a key mechanism to ensure post-secondary programs are current, relevant, and continue to meet the evolving needs of students and employers. Additionally, quality assurance plays an important role in supporting institutional accountability to the government and society at large. Therefore, quality assurance is dual-natured; internal quality assurance (IQA) refers to the policies and practices academic institutions develop to monitor and improve the quality of their programs, while external quality assurance (EQA) refers to compliance with agreed upon (or imposed) system standards set by EQA agencies (Dill, 2007). In a perfect world, these processes are inter-related and co-exist in harmony; in reality, they are often at odds with each other.

There is much debate and dialogue regarding quality assurance in post-secondary education. In addition to exploring different definitions and constructs of quality, research in this area focuses on evolving approaches to managing quality (Bendermacher et al.,

2017; Dzimińska et al., 2018; Ehlers, 2009; Elassy, 2015; Elken & Stensaker, 2018; Houston, 2008; Mårtensson et al., 2014; Newton, 2002; Westerheijden et al., 2014) and on the tension between accountability and improvement (Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Genis, 2002; Hoecht, 2006; Kleijnen et al., 2011; Liu, 2020; Stensaker, 2018). There is also a noticeable shift occurring; while compliance and accountability have historically been the dominant drivers for quality assurance, as systems across the globe have evolved and matured, more attention has been given to the improvement element (Elassy, 2015; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Genis, 2002; Harvey & Newton, 2004; Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Liu, 2020).

Research also focuses on how different stakeholders perceive the effectiveness and impact of quality assurance. A fundamental challenge is that different stakeholder groups perceive quality in post-secondary education differently (Schindler et al., 2015). Houston (2008) illustrates the complex, interconnected relationships between post-secondary institutions and different internal and external stakeholder groups. From a quality assurance perspective, these relationships can also be expressed as forces that each exert their own influence, as shown in Figure 1.
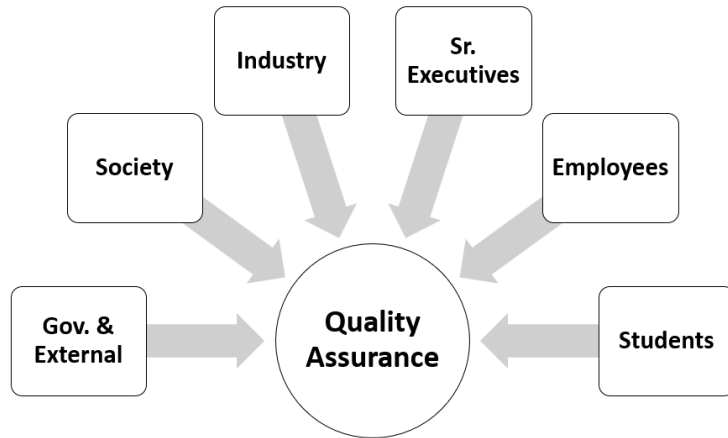
Figure 1. Forces Exerting Influence on Quality Assurance in Post-secondary Education

Developing quality assurance processes that satisfy the needs of all these stakeholders is essentially an impossible task. Rather, post-secondary institutions must seek to understand and balance the needs of these stakeholders and manage the tensions that inevitably result. While this concept is easy to understand at a macro-level, how does this actually unfold at institutions on a micro-level? Who leads this work and how do the perceptions and experiences of these individuals impact quality assurance?

1.2   Purpose of Study

This study seeks to better understand quality assurance work by exploring the perceptions and experiences of quality managers, defined as the individuals who directly oversee quality assurance processes in post-secondary institutions. These individuals play a unique role in managing stakeholder needs and shaping quality assurance processes; therefore, there is value in understanding their perceptions of quality, their experiences

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leading quality assurance work, and their thoughts on the future of quality assurance in post-secondary education.

Fundamentally, quality managers act as *quality intermediaries*. As shown in Figure 2, they must consider all the forces that impact quality assurance and then develop and lead quality assurance processes that balance and harmonize these forces.

Figure 2. Forces Exerting Influence on Quality Assurance in Post-secondary Education and the Role of Quality Managers as Intermediaries

To better understand this phenomenon, a qualitative study was designed to explore the perceptions and experiences of quality managers at eight of the 24 Ontario colleges (Colleges Ontario, n.d.). The overall intent of this study is to identify, describe, and

analyze the experiences of quality managers in order to shed light on their perspectives

and to inform quality assurance policies and practices in post-secondary education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1   Definitions of Quality in Post-secondary Education

Quality is not easy to define. It is inherently an elusive and intangible concept. However, as notions of quality in post-secondary education began to emerge and become entangled with concepts such as cost effectiveness, scholars attempted to consider and describe different definitions of quality. Harvey and Green (1993) note that quality is a relative concept; it can mean different things to different people, and even different things to the same person at different times. Therefore, stakeholder perceptions of quality must be explored in order to understand what quality means to these individuals and groups. The authors propose five different ways to think about quality in post-secondary education:

1. *Quality as Exceptional*. Achieving excellence by exceeding high (objective) standards.

2. *Quality as Perfection/Consistency*. Achieving excellence through conformity to specification.

3. *Quality as Fitness for Purpose*. Doing the job it was designed for; meeting the needs of the customer and/or organization.

4. *Quality as Value for Money*. Considered in direct relation to cost; closely linked to accountability.

5. *Quality as Transformative*. Enhancing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the consumer and empowering them by transforming their conceptual abilities and self-awareness.

These concepts help frame quality in more concrete terms and can serve as a jumping off point for stakeholders; depending on their background and experiences, one or more of these concepts will resonate with them.

Building on the seminal work of Harvey and Green (1993), many scholars have considered the definition of quality in post-secondary education over the past 25 years as institutions have struggled to operationalize quality assurance and assess quality. Schindler et al. (2015) conducted a synthesis of the literature on this topic. In addition to the issue of quality perceptions being stakeholder-specific, they noted two additional challenges related to defining quality in post-secondary education:

1. *Quality is a multi-dimensional concept*. Trying to encapsulate quality in a one-sentence definition is problematic as it results in something that is one-dimensional, lacks meaning and specificity, or is too general to be operationalized.

2. *Quality is dynamic*. It is ever-changing and must always be considered in the context of the larger educational, economic, political, and social landscape. Political drivers, such as accountability for use of public funds, can exert heavy influence on quality constructs.

Schindler et al. summarized the literature into the following four broad classifications of quality, which are consistent with the concepts of Harvey and Green (1993).

1. *Purposeful*. Institutional products and services conform to a stated mission/vision or a set of specifications, requirements, or standards.

2. *Exceptional*. Institutional products and services achieve distinction and exclusivity through the fulfillment of high standards.

3. *Transformative*. Institutional products and services effect positive change in student learning and personal and professional potential.

4. *Accountable*. Institutions are accountable to stakeholders for the optimal use of resources and the delivery of accurate educational products and services with zero defects.

In addition to these classifications, Schindler et al. (2015) also identify specific quality indicators that reflect desired quality assurance inputs and outputs, thus moving closer to determining how to assess quality. These indicators include:

1. *Administrative Indicators*. Developing a relevant mission and vision, establishing institutional legitimacy, achieving internal/external standards and goals, and procuring resources for optimal institutional functioning.

2. *Student Support Indicators*. The availability and responsiveness of student support services.

3. *Instructional Indicators*. The relevancy of educational content and the competence of instructors.

4. *Student Performance Indicators.* Student engagement with curriculum, faculty, and staff, and increases in knowledge, skills, and abilities that lead to gainful employment.

These different quality definitions, frameworks, and indicators illustrate that quality is a concept which is open to the interpretation of groups and individuals. They also illustrate how certain definitions of quality seem to be conflicting or opposing. Quality assurance systems therefore must align their purpose and structures with one or more of these definitions and determine how to work with institutions to implement quality assurance processes.

2.2   Quality Assurance Systems – Local and Global

Public post-secondary institutions have a primary accountability to government and, indirectly, to the taxpayers who fund them. To oversee post-secondary quality, governments in many countries have established EQA agencies (Dill, 2007; Shah, 2012; Stensaker, 2018). EQA takes a system approach to quality by defining standards that all institutions must adhere to. Stensaker (2018) identifies the benefits of EQA as: 1) the ability to monitor system effectiveness, efficiency and relevance; 2) the provision of useful information about quality to different stakeholders in the sector; and 3) the stimulus of quality improvement in education and training in general. However, there are many who dispute the latter and question the actual impact of EQA on improvements in teaching and learning For example, in a study regarding the impacts of the Norwegian quality assurance system, 24.5% of respondents from post-secondary institutions felt that

quality assurance processes had no effect on the quality of the education/teaching (Langfeldt et al., 2010). A similar study in Portugal revealed that faculty perceive that quality assurance processes bring awareness to teaching quality issues but don't necessarily lead to actual improvements or innovations (Tavares et al., 2017).

At the turn of the century, pivotal events occurred in the history of post-secondary quality assurance in Canada and abroad. In 1999, representatives of 29 European countries signed the Bologna Declaration, a commitment to work collectively to enable greater mobility and employability for its citizens by developing a more compatible and comparable post-secondary education system (Huisman et al., 2012). Six action lines were proposed: 1) the adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; 2) the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles: undergraduate and graduate; 3) the establishment of a system of credits as a proper means of promoting mobility; 4) promotion of student and staff mobility; 5) promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance; and 6) promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education.

To support this bold vision, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) (later renamed the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) was established in 2000 (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, n.d.-a). ENQA acts as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna Declaration signatory countries. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher

Education Area (also known as the European Standards and Guidelines or ESG), were originally developed in 2005 and were revised in 2015. They serve as the basis for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, n.d.-b). Additionally, the European Qualifications Framework, organized by learning outcome rather than explicitly by credential, was established in 2008 (Europass, n.d.).

During this same period, major changes were happening to post-secondary education in Ontario. In 2000, the provincial government passed the Post-secondary Education Choice and Excellence Act (Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board, n.d.). This act was significant in that it afforded Ontario colleges the ability to offer degrees. The Postsecondary Education Quality Assessment Board (PEQAB) was established the following year to oversee all degree applications.

In 2002, PEQAB created the Ontario Qualifications Framework (OQF), the first such framework in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, n.d.-a). The OQF supports the quality, accessibility and accountability of its post-secondary education system by assuring that Ontario credentials, regardless of which institution offers them, are all held to the same standard.

By 2010, Ontario had established two additional external agencies to support quality assurance and continuous improvement: the Ontario College Quality Assurance Service (OCQAS) and the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (OUCQA) (Liu, 2015). Similar to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher

Education, these agencies define standards that serve as the basis for quality assurance at Ontario post-secondary institutions.

OUCQA's Quality Assurance Framework supports the universities in both demonstrating compliance with established standards and investing in quality improvement (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, 2021). The framework includes 15 principles that guide and inform every aspect of quality assurance, as well as a more detailed set of protocols that specify the minimum requirements for quality assurance activities. The framework places high emphasis on quality assurance as an accountability mechanism. The Council operates at arm's length from both the universities and the provincial government (Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance, n.d.).

OCQAS, on the other hand, is owned, operated and funded by the Ontario colleges (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, n.d.). While similarly independent from the government, OCQAS' ownership model positions this organization more as a partner to the colleges. Their quality assurance framework consists of six standards with detailed requirements that reflect expectations for the colleges. Emphasis is placed on ensuring quality systems are sufficiently robust, effective, and aligned with the vision, mission, and goals of the institution (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, 2021).

It is important to note that recently, a new set of five standards related to international students was developed by Colleges Ontario (Colleges Ontario, 2023a), in collaboration with OCQAS, and adopted by 23 of the 24 Ontario colleges. These

standards were developed to attract more international students in support of Ontario's labour market needs and were informed by best practices from international jurisdictions (Colleges Ontario, 2023b). OCQAS and the Ontario colleges will now have to determine how to introduce and assess institutional practices against these new standards.

The affinity of Ontario and Europe from a quality assurance perspective supports the rationale to use quality assurance research conducted in Europe as a basis for quality assurance research in Ontario. Another jurisdiction of note in post-secondary education quality assurance is Australia. Similarly, in 2000, Australia introduced major changes to its post-secondary quality assurance system. It developed its first quality assurance framework, implemented new national protocols for higher education approval processes, and established an EQA agency – the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) (Shah et al., 2011). Changes in government later that decade brought additional attention to the post-secondary education sector; a major review of post-secondary education (the Bradley review) was commissioned, focusing on funding, access, collaboration between institutions, student experience, research and quality assurance. The outcomes were major changes in policy, direction, and funding (Shah et al., 2011).

There is evidence in all three jurisdictions, as well as others, of reflection and analysis on the effectiveness of new quality assurance systems approximately a decade after they were established (Genis, 2002; Filippakou & Tapper, 2008; Heap, 2013; Lang, 2015; Shah, 2012; Shah et al., 2011; Westerheijden et al., 2014). As systems mature, stakeholders begin to question if these new systems are working as intended.

2.2.1 *Quality Assurance Research in Colleges and Polytechnics*

Quality assurance research in the context of colleges and polytechnics is underrepresented in the literature, which leaves a gap in understanding how this work unfolds in this type of post-secondary institution. Colleges, with shorter and more vocationally-oriented programs and without a distinct research mandate, may experience unique challenges in implementing quality assurance processes. In quality assurance research on technikons, post-secondary institutes of technology in South Africa, Genis (2002) notes that as these types of institutions offer career-focused programs, employment of graduates and the recognition of technikon qualifications by industry were generally accepted as suitable indicators of quality. However, as technikons matured and began introducing degrees, this rather restricted view of quality became less acceptable. Other interpretations of quality, such as excellence, value for money, and transformation, began to influence quality assurance processes and cause tension with the existing quality assurance framework. Genis observes that this is a natural consequence of evolution and familiarity and that, while imperfect, EQA ultimately did have a positive influence in teaching and learning.

Recognizing the differences between colleges and universities, although the lines between the two types of institutions continue to blur, Skolnik (2016) examines quality assurance in post-secondary education systems where there are two distinct sectors, one with a more academic orientation and the other with a more applied orientation. In his discussion of the Ontario system, Skolnik observes that some Ontario colleges expressed

dissatisfaction with PEQAB's degree quality assurance standards and processes, which they felt were more aligned to the university model and did not take into account the career-focused nature of college degree programs. Skolnik notes that this dissatisfaction led to a recommendation by Colleges Ontario (2012) to move degree approvals to OCQAS, thus consolidating quality assurance for college credentials under one EQA agency. However, this recommendation did not lead to action or change.

2.2.2 *Quality Assurance Research in Ontario*

There are several recent studies related to quality assurance at Ontario post-secondary institutions, which suggests a desire to explore and understand the impact and effectiveness of its established quality assurance structures and processes. With the largest number of public universities in Canada (Kim, 2018) and the largest number of public colleges in Canada (Colleges and Institutes Canada, n.d.), Ontario is an important site for quality assurance research. Furthermore, Goff (2016) also explicitly notes there is a significant gap in the Canadian literature on the conceptions and operational definitions of quality in post-secondary education.

Arvast (2008) reviewed the program review process at an Ontario college and suggests that it simply reinforces the neoliberal view of post-secondary education as a product; rather than a supporting a meaningful analysis of the curriculum and teaching and learning practices, the process is in fact only a superficial administrative function related to accountability. Likewise, Heap (2013) and Lang (2015) critique Ontario's

quality assurance framework for universities and suggest that the systems and processes which are in place are more focused on compliance than improvement.

An examination of an internal quality assurance at an Ontario university suggests similar findings (Kim, 2018). Kim observes a disconnect between the intention and the administration of quality assurance; while quality was positioned as intended to meet higher level, improvement-related objectives, ultimately the participants' descriptions of quality and the content of quality assurance documents reflected a neoliberal agenda. Quality was described as being focused on value for money and demonstrating compliance, which led to disingenuous engagement in the process and the omission of unflattering information and data as "manoeuvers [sic] in the game of quality assurance" (Kim, 2018, p. 132).

Another study, which included two Ontario universities and two Ontario colleges, found evidence that institutions were trying to balance EQA policies with internal continuous improvement (Liu, 2020). At one of the colleges, study participants acknowledged the importance of EQA structures and frameworks, as well as the need for quality assurance processes to support institutional strategies. One of the participants in this study was a quality manager at an Ontario college. They described the need to balance and embrace government, college, and stakeholder requirements. Liu's findings also highlight the significant role individual leaders play in enabling or impeding quality assurance processes and outcomes.

The concept of enabling or impeding quality assurance processes is also present in an analysis of the content of quality assurance documents at an Ontario university (Bowker, 2016). Bowker notes that quality assurance documents often use unnecessarily formal and bureaucratic language, such as *must, should,* and *shall*, as well as critical language, such as *judgment* and *deficiency*. Furthermore, language that implied a power differential was also observed, such as "… programs will be **subjected to** cyclical review…" (Bowker, 2016, p. 187). The author suggests that these language choices do not portray a respectful tone and contribute to faculty resistance to quality assurance processes.

Each of these studies illustrate one of the primary themes in the literature related to quality assurance in post-secondary education, which is the tension between accountability and improvement. Post-secondary institutions must demonstrate compliance with EQA standards and policies. However, they also need to create quality assurance processes that empower faculty and administrators to assess the quality of teaching and learning and that lead directly to tangible improvements.

2.3 Accountability – Improvement Tensions

2.3.1 Conceptual Models

The accountability – improvement tension is reflected in the concepts of retrospective and prospective quality assurance (Biggs, 2001). Retrospective quality assurance looks back to what has already been done and makes a summative judgment against external standards. This concept assumes that the indicators being used actually

reflect good teaching and good management; its primary objective is assessment for the purposes of a quality cost-benefit analysis. Conversely, prospective quality assurance is concerned with assuring that teaching and learning fit the purpose of the institution now and in the future; its primary objective is to encourage continuous improvement.

This concept is taken a step further with accountability and improvement conceptualized as a continuum that institutions position themselves upon (Elassy, 2015; Genis, 2002). As EQA systems and agencies emerged, this clearly resulted in an orientation towards accountability; however, as systems matured institutions sought a greater balance between compliance with EQA standards and institutional initiatives to manage the quality of learning programs, driven by their own interests and the interests of their stakeholders. The continuum model can present accountability and improvement as opposing forces (Genis, 2002), or as two quality approaches that are integrated, sequential, and interactive (Elassy, 2015).

While useful as a concept to understand accountability and improvement, the continuum model can also create a divide between these two quality assurance drivers. Hodson and Thomas (2003) suggest a modified continuum, where compliance and enhancement are two points on an interconnected loop, expressing that these concepts are not diametrically opposed; rather, they are closely connected and need to be bridged. The authors suggest that actively engaging all stakeholders in EQA activities (such as cyclical audits) rather than restricting this work to a small group of senior academics, allows

quality assurance work to penetrate into the core of the operation, which makes it all the more likely to lead to quality improvement.

2.3.2 Tensions in Action

Filippakou and Tapper (2008) observe a major shift from quality assurance towards quality enhancement in the United Kingdom, approximately 10 years after its EQA agency, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), was established. In response to resistance and negative perceptions of quality assurance systems related to trust and control (Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Hoecht, 2006), the QAA expanded its mandate to include both quality assurance and quality enhancement. However, at the time of this change stakeholders expressed skepticism that this new focus would meaningfully change the QAA audit process or actually encourage quality enhancement at the institutional level.

Tensions between accountability and improvement are also evident in Australia, again, approximately 10 years after the establishment of its EQA agency (Shah, 2012). Following an analysis of audit reports and stakeholder perceptions, Shah concludes that EQA processes have led to improvements at the institutional level by ensuring universities address the findings of their audits. However, critics of the EQA system argue that the audits primarily focus on inputs and IQA processes, which are far easier to control and produce, rather than actual outcomes.

From a different perspective, the tension between accountability and improvement can be explored through the lens of how quality assurance inhibits or enables innovative

outcomes (Mello Silva & Vargas, 2022). The authors conducted a review of 63 articles related to the relationship between quality assurance process and innovation. They observe that when quality assurance systems impose standards and focus on compliance, innovation is hindered as the institution's autonomy is undermined and it must absorb unnecessary costs related to demonstrating compliance. Conversely, when quality assurance processes have developed and matured to be more focused on practice analysis and assessment, they can play a role in fostering innovation. Mello Silva and Vargas go on to suggest that, while there is no consensus on whether innovation is fostered or hindered by quality assurance processes, it seems that the likelihood of innovative outcomes is directly related to how these processes are managed at the institutional level.

Stakeholder engagement is a critical input to quality assurance processes. Engaging stakeholders at the operational level, who have diverse perspectives and needs, is noted as being critical for quality assurance processes to pave the way for innovation (Mello Silva & Vargas, 2022). Some of the recent literature illuminates the accountability – improvement tension by examining stakeholder perceptions of quality assurance.

2.4   Stakeholder Perceptions of Quality Assurance

2.4.1   Faculty

Faculty are critical actors in quality assurance processes; their support for and buy-in for these processes is key. However, it is important to consider whether faculty believe that quality assurance creates opportunities to reflect and improve, or if they

instead see quality assurance as simply a bureaucratic burden. Several studies explore such faculty perceptions of quality assurance.

Quality assurance is perceived most negatively by faculty when it is primarily associated with control and measuring standards (Cardoso et al., 2013; Kleijnen et al., 2011; Safadi & Vlachopoulos, 2021). Faculty also express negative perceptions related to bureaucracy, power imbalances, and the concept of quality assurance as a token ritual focused on checking boxes (Cartwright, 2007; Hoecht, 2006) or simply a game to be played (Bowker, 2016; Elassy, 2015).

Faculty express more positive sentiments when they perceive quality assurance to be focused on improvement (Kleijnen et al., 2011) and when it promotes self-reflection, knowledge, and the continuous improvement of teaching and learning (Cardoso et al., 2013). Faculty also perceive quality assurance more positively when they perceive that it is bringing increased attention to quality in teaching and learning for the benefit of students (Elassy, 2015; Kleijnen et al., 2011; Tavares et al., 2017). However, even when faculty express positive sentiments about quality assurance processes, there are still questions regarding whether these processes actually lead to improvements or innovation (Cardoso et al., 2018; Elassy, 2015; Mello Silva & Vargas, 2022; Tavares et al., 2017).

Interestingly, Liu (2020) observed differences in the perceptions of faculty at universities and colleges. More resistance was observed at the university setting, where participants perceived the learning outcomes approach defined by the EQA to be misaligned with their discipline. Liu suggests that the relationship between outcomes-

based accountability mechanisms and intrinsic interest in institutional improvement is less contentious at the college level as faculty are more willing to accept an outcomes-based model.

The background and experiences of the faculty were also found to impact their perceptions (Cardoso et al., 2013). Quality assurance systems tend to be more positively perceived by women, faculty from polytechnics, faculty from Medical and Health Sciences, and faculty with previous experience in quality assurance activities. This aligns with findings from Rucker et al. (2015) which suggest that faculty perceive quality assurance processes as being a bit "fuzzy" the first time and then easier to complete once they have experience.

2.4.2   Students, Staff, and Employers

Limited research has also been conducted to understand other stakeholder perceptions of quality and experiences with quality assurance processes. Law (2010) notes that while there is a greater amount of literature into students' evaluations of teaching effectiveness at the course level, an appropriate focus of quality assurance should be related to students' experiences with their entire program and their experiences as a learner at the institution.

Teaching experience in the classroom is suggested to have the greatest impact on students' perceptions of quality (Hill et al., 2003). In this study, participants associated high quality with faculty who taught and supported them in a way that met their needs. Participants also valued interacting with engaging and challenging curriculum that

broadened their mindsets. Similarly, Choy et al. (2017) identified four variables that contribute to quality learning and lead to quality outcomes: 1) instructional delivery and support; 2) learning skills; 3) learning environment; and 4) curriculum. These influences on perceptions of quality were found to be complex, with strong positive relationships between all elements. This suggests that student perceptions of quality are highly nuanced and multi-faceted.

Staff and employers offer their own perspectives and place value on different aspects on quality in post-secondary education. While students and staff place emphasis on the quality of the learning process, such as academic facilities and the teaching and learning experience, employers place more emphasis on quality related to outcomes, such as a graduate who possesses the expected hard and soft skills that are required to perform in the workplace (Dicker et al., 2019).

In terms of stakeholder perceptions of quality assurance processes, the literature reveals different degrees of student awareness and engagement. When awareness and participation in quality assurance processes are low, institutions should leverage policies, promotion, and education to increase student engagement (Ahmed et al., 2021). Moreover, when engagement is occurring, there may still be a need to help students understand the purpose of quality assurance activities as being both compliance based and improvement focused (Mourad, 2013). Students also need to understand the benefits and outcomes of quality assurance processes. When there is high student awareness yet low

engagement in quality assurance processes, students may perceive their feedback will not lead to actual improvements (Ta et al., 2023).

2.4.3 Quality Managers

The role of quality managers is underrepresented in the literature, as research in this area often focuses on the perceptions of stakeholders who participate in, rather than lead, quality assurance processes. However, a number of recent studies have explored the perceptions and experiences of quality managers responsible for developing and leading quality assurance processes. These studies have helped to illuminate the pivotal and mediating nature of these roles.

Goff (2016) explored how quality managers conceptualize quality, using the retrospective quality assurance (accountability) and prospective quality assurance (enhancement) model (Biggs, 2001). Participants in this study were challenged to provide formal definitions of quality, however their comments aligned with four conceptions of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993): 1) quality as exceptional; 2) quality as value for money; 3) quality as fitness for purpose; and 4) quality as transformation. Additionally, the implementation strategies adopted by quality managers were explored and organized into three hierarchical levels: Level 1 – decentralized support with focus on administrative accountability; Level 2 – engaged support with focus on accountability to students; and Level 3 – engaged support with focus on reflection and enhancement. Goff suggests that administrators who hold conceptions of quality as transformation are most focused on enhancing the student experience and are the most forward-looking.

Osseo-Asare et al. (2005) explored the perceptions of quality managers in relation to leadership practices and sustainable levels of academic quality improvement. In this study, 85% of the quality managers who were surveyed disagreed that EQA requirements brought about significant improvement in the effectiveness of leadership, policies, and strategies for quality improvement. Quality managers have limited positional authority and therefore they need to exert influence over other actors. To that end, one respondent in the study noted that:

> Quality managers who were judged to be effective leaders were those whose influence on staff stems from their ability to use their legitimate position, personal qualities, and expert knowledge to reward and sometimes exercise a reasonable level of coercion, in order to obtain intended staff behaviour and results. (Osseo-Asare et al., 2005, p. 158)

The authors observe that most quality managers do not see themselves as leaders, thus making them less effective in supporting achievement of the desired results.

Similarly, Seyfried (2019) explored the perceptions of quality managers, specifically related to quality assurance policy implementation. The author suggests that quality managers have different understandings of quality management, which are inspired by their daily work. Some view quality assurance as a soft instrument characterized by negotiation and communication, while others view quality assurance as a hard instrument for the execution of standards and practices. Seyfried connects these notions with the concepts of quality management for learning and quality management for

control (Hoecht, 2006). Furthermore, the author suggests that the perceptions of quality managers are also influenced by their professional backgrounds (administrative or faculty) and contends that the selection of staff may have serious implications in the implementation of quality management.

Moving from perceptions to behaviours and actions, Reith and Seyfried (2019) explored the reactions of faculty to quality assurance and the tactics quality managers employ when faced with resistance. Faculty may interpret quality assurance processes as simply an administrative burden, or worse, as a threat to the status quo. Reactions can vary from passive resistance (avoidance, minimal effort) to active confrontation (refusal to participate, vocal criticism). Reith and Seyfried suggest that quality managers respond to resistance with negotiation (references to internal requirements), legitimation (references to external requirements), and promotion (references to benefits and outcomes). Specific tactics to deal with resistance include balancing (harmonizing external requirements and internal demands), pacifying (making the requirement easier to achieve), and bargaining (offering more information and assistance). Reith and Seyfried contend that there is value in exploring how actors react during the implementation of quality assurance policies in order to better understand how to resolve conflicts, how to avoid negative unintended consequences, and how to use the creative potential of conflict and disagreement for the further development of institutional processes.

2.5   New Conceptual Approaches to Quality

Quality assurance is inherently a rigid concept; meaning, it is constructed to be clear and objective. It involves standards, measurement, metrics, and ratings. However, as post-secondary institutions matured in their experience with quality, there emerged new thinking that quality also needs to be supported by an organizational culture based on shared values, necessary competencies and new professionalism. It is not something that can be pre-defined, but rather it is something that has to be created through negotiation and participation from different stakeholders (Ehlers, 2009). Thus, the concept of quality culture emerges. Based on concepts of organizational culture, Ehlers proposes a framework for quality culture with four components:

1. *Structures*. Systems, tools, and mechanisms to assure, manage, enhance or accredit quality in a suitable way.

2. *Enabling Factors*. Elements which enable individuals and groups to take up the new processes, regulations, mechanisms and rules and incorporate them into their own actions.

3. *Quality Cultures*. Existing assumptions about quality, newly discussed and shared values, rituals, and tangible cultural artefacts. In a large and complex institution quality is not a singular concept; it can vary from department to department.

4. *Transversal Elements*. Communication, participation, and trust is needed to turn quality potentials into culturally rooted quality realities.

Dzimińska et al. (2018) emphasize trust as a key component of quality culture. They present a trust-based quality culture model, building on three elements of quality culture: 1) formal quality assurance processes (structural/managerial); 2) quality commitment (cultural/psychological); and 3) communication, participation, and trust (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). In their model, Dzimińska et al. position trust as a foundational element between faculty, students, and the institution. This foundation fosters a quality culture, which consists of both drivers (structural/managerial elements) and supportive measures (cultural/psychological elements). Leadership and communication are then positioned as enabling forces that lead to quality culture outcomes – actions to improve teaching and learning. Dzimińska et al. observe that while academics often perceive EQA as a withdrawal from trust, quality culture breeds trust as it is built through communication, participation, and empowerment. However, organizational culture is not always something that is easy to influence and change. What specific actions can leaders take to foster a culture of quality?

Bendermacher et al. (2016) sought to identify specific organizational elements that hinder and promote quality culture development and to explore the most important mechanisms of quality culture. The authors also build on the three elements of quality culture: 1) formal quality assurance processes (structural/managerial); 2) quality commitment (cultural/psychological); and 3) communication, participation, and trust (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). The authors suggest that these three elements form the *Organizational Context* domain of quality culture. Additionally, the authors suggest there

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is a *Mechanism* domain, where relations and agency are supported by knowledge, empowerment, shared ownership and commitment. And finally, there is an *Outcomes* domain, where continuous improvement of the teaching and learning process is evidenced by student and staff satisfaction and development. Therefore, quality culture results from an interplay between these three domains. In particular, Bendermacher et al. emphasize relations (human interaction) and agency (reasons for action) as the most important mechanisms. This highlights the power individual actors have to influence, develop, and shape quality culture. This emphasis on actions and behaviours leads to another emerging quality concept – quality work.

Quality work is presented as a concept to better understand the actual processes involved in quality improvement (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). The authors suggest there is a gap between the concepts of quality management and quality culture; between these two concepts are the day-to-day operational activities that are undertaken to maintain and enhance quality. Quality work emphasizes the interrelated practices of quality development, maintenance, and enhancement. Attention is shifted away from broad groups of stakeholders who participate in quality assurance to the agency and actions of the specific actors who lead quality assurance.

Elken and Stensaker (2018) position quality work in between quality management and quality culture, and describe its characteristics as follows:

1. *Rationale*: Balancing accountability and improvement;

2. *Notion of quality*: Negotiated and dynamic notions of quality;

3. *Actors' roles*: Problem solvers and innovators;

4. *Underlying logic*: Rooted in pragmatism; and

5. *Power and authority*: Individuals having autonomy related to practice.

This concept serves as the jumping off point for this study. Elken and Stensaker suggest that rather than studying how specific institutional structures, systems, strategies, and values affect quality, attention should be turned towards how actors' quality work reshapes institutions themselves. They contend there is a need for studies where the problem-solving capacity of those working in the quality sector (quality managers) are displayed and analyzed in detail.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Phenomenological Approach

The methodology for this study is grounded in the subjective approach to social science, as described by Cohen et al. (2018). The ontological foundation for this study is nominalist; reality is the product of individual consciousness. The belief that knowledge is personal, subjective, and unique suggests a post-positivist epistemology and the contention that humans are initiators of their own actions and produce their environments aligns with voluntarism. Based on these assumptions, an idiographic methodology – one that emphasizes the particular and individual case – is most appropriate. Therefore, a phenomenological approach was selected for this research.

Phenomenology can be described as a philosophy rather than a scientific research method (Norlyk & Harder, 2010) which encompasses a range of research approaches (Finlay, 2012). It "starts with the researcher who has a curiosity or a passion that is turned into a research question" (Finlay, 2012, p. 175). The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation, with emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation (Lester, 1999). The phenomenological researcher seeks to describe the phenomenon as accurately as possible, refraining from any pre-given framework (Groenewald, 2004). Key philosophical features of phenomenology are: 1) the significance of understanding how and why participants' knowledge of a situation comes to be what is; and 2) the social and cultural situatedness of actions and interactions, together with participants'

interpretations of a situation (Cohen et al., 2018). Lester (1999) also suggests that phenomenological methods are effective at challenging structural or normative assumptions; this research can be used as the basis for practical theory and to inform, support or challenge policy and action.

Openness to new understanding and questioning pre-understandings are the foundations of phenomenological research (Finlay, 2012; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Sundler et al., 2019). This requires the researcher to use different methods to address their attitudes and assumptions, not only during data analysis but throughout the research process. In phenomenology, a "bracketing" approach (Finlay, 2012; Groenewald, 2004; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Sundler et al., 2019) is commonly used whereby the researcher temporarily suspends or sets aside their attitudes and assumptions. Some hermeneutic phenomenologists disagree that this is possible and argue that it is preferable for researchers instead to remain aware of their assumptions while attempting to rein them in (Finlay, 2012) and question them with a reflective attitude (Sundler et al., 2019).

Reflexivity is a common approach for managing and mitigating insider-researcher biases and preunderstandings. Bourdieu (1977, as cited in Teusner, 2016) suggests that reflexivity helps researchers unmask social reality and reveal concealed presumptions. In order to increase the validity of phenomenological research, researchers should clearly demonstrate how reflexivity was maintained throughout the study and present the analysis and findings as thoroughly and transparently as possible (Sundler et al., 2019).

Additionally, in order to increase the credibility of a phenomenological study, sufficient data extracts should be presented to support the themes identified and to illustrate the story of the data in a compelling manner that is directly related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.2   Insider Research

The researcher occupies the position of quality manager at an Ontario college. This positions the researcher as an "insider" as there is a degree of closeness to the population they wish to examine (Taylor, 2011), such as a lived familiarity (Mercer, 2007). For many years, the notion of insider research was deemed to be unethical or invalid as objectivity and detachment were seen as critical elements in social science research (Bennett, 2003). There were also more practical concerns regarding the difficulty of studying something one is heavily involved in; the researcher is "too close" to the research (Alvesson, 2003; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

Over time, insider research has become more commonplace in qualitative research, which acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of the researcher and encourages reflexivity (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). It is particularly prevalent in cultural research (Alvesson, 2003; Bennett, 2002; Taylor, 2011; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013) and organizational research (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Mercer, 2007; Teusner, 2016). With insider research, managing the researcher's attitudes and assumptions is of even greater importance than with a phenomenological study led by an outsider-researcher as the researcher has not only knowledge but significant, related lived experiences. Bennett

(2002) suggests that insider-researchers must consider how their views might be coloured

by existing knowledge and value judgements and recommends that insider-researchers

critically reflect on the duality of their role. Brannick and Coghlan (2007) suggest that

insider-researchers use a process of reflexivity to consider the strengths and limits of their

preunderstanding and use experiential and theoretical knowledge to reframe their

understanding of situations to which they are close. Furthermore, Taylor (2011) shares

that as an insider-researcher "self-critique and reflexivity have allowed me to gain some

distance from the familiar and unlearn the seemingly natural ways of my own behaviour"

(p. 16).

A review of the literature surfaces advantages and disadvantages of insider

research, as well as strategies to acknowledge the duality of the insider-researcher role

and to address the natural tensions that can arise in this type of research. There are several

advantages of insider research, including:

1. *Access*. Insider-researchers may have natural access (Alevesson, 2003; Mercer,

   2007) or facilitated access based on subculture membership or "street cred"

   (Taylor, 2011; Teusner, 2016; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013).

2. *Familiarity*. Insider-researchers can quickly establish rapport and trust (Mercer,

   2007; Taylor, 2011), as they know the "lingo" (Taylor, 2011) and which roles to

   play once access has been granted (Bennett, 2002). They also have lived

   experiences and contextually embedded knowledge (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

3. *Understanding*. Insider-researchers understand how things "really" work (Teusner, 2016), and what occupies colleagues' minds (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). They can obtain richer data as they have understanding in use rather than reconstituted understanding (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Insiders are empathetic (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013) and potentially, better positioned to reveal "the true story" (Alvesson, 2003).

There are also several disadvantages of insider research, including:

1. *Bias*. Insider views will always be multiple and contestable (Taylor, 2011). The insider-researcher's politics, loyalties, or hidden agendas may lead to misrepresentation (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Teusner, 2016), more flattering descriptions (Alvesson, 2003), or erroneous conclusions (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Insiders may also seek out members most like themselves (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

2. *Assumptions and Blind Spots*. The researcher may make assumptions based on preunderstanding and not probe participants enough (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). Insiders may engage in "emphatic understanding", which can lead to participants wanting to agree with and please the insider-researcher (Alvesson, 2003). Insiders may also have difficulties extracting shared knowledge and implied knowings (Taylor, 2011), leading to blind spots (Alvesson, 2003).

3. *Role Duality*. Participants may not feel comfortable speaking candidly with an insider-researcher (Teusner, 2016), previously existing relationships may cause undue influence (Taylor, 2011), and some participants may wonder who they are "really" talking to – the researcher or the insider (Bennett, 2002; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Mercer, 2007). Insider-researchers themselves may also struggle with identification dilemmas (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007).

In general, insider research can be adversely impacted by the inability of researchers to liberate themselves from socially shared frameworks in which their positions or preunderstanding might be entrenched (Alvesson, 2003). To combat this challenge, insider-researchers must acknowledge the duality of their role and consider it throughout the research process (Alvesson, 2003; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Taylor, 2011; Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). A variety of strategies can be employed to mitigate the disadvantages of insider research and strengthen its credibility. Alvesson (2003) outlines five methods for creating distance between oneself and one's cultural inclinations:

1. *Embrace irony and self-irony*. Even temporarily taking ironic positions that counter the researcher's beliefs can create a certain distance as the alternate viewpoint is considered.

2. *Use a theory which challenge common sense*. Theories that facilitate looking at things in a more all-sided way and promote self-questioning, such as Foucault (1976, as cited in Alvesson, 2003), may help disrupt fixed preunderstandings.

3. *Build up an interpretive repertoire*. Develop a breadth of knowledge in order to read and interpret empirical material in a variety of ways.

4. *Work with a notion of reflexivity*. Actively move between levels of interpretation and different perspectives so that one's favored interpretation can be challenged.

5. *Work with different self-concepts*. Personal attitudes are not fixed or absolute but are context dependent. Take different positions based on different self-concepts (e.g., student, woman, parent, professional) to facilitate broader analysis.

Additionally, Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2013) suggest four strategies for acknowledging and managing the experience of the insider-researcher:

1. *Minimize*. Ignore and/or make no attempt to represent the insider-researcher's experience.

2. *Utilize*. Leverage insider status strategically to facilitate the research process, in terms of access, recruitment, and participant rapport.

3. *Maximize*. Leverage the researcher's personal experience by studying one's own experience (i.e., autoethnography).

4. *Incorporate*. Include the researcher as one of the participants and treat them as having the same status as all other participants.

3.3   Research Questions

This research aims to answer the following research questions in this study:

1. How do quality managers perceive quality in post-secondary education?

2. What are the experiences of quality managers in leading comprehensive program review?

    a. Experiences with the process;

    b. Experiences with internal stakeholders; and

    c. Experiences with external stakeholders.

3. How do quality managers perceive the effectiveness of comprehensive program review at their institution?

4. How do quality managers perceive their ability to influence quality at their institution?

    a. Influencing the process and documentation;

    b. Influencing the stakeholders; and

    c. Influencing the culture.

5. How do quality managers describe the future of quality in post-secondary education?

3.4 Sampling and Recruitment

The recruitment of eight participants was planned for this study, which aligns with the best practice of selecting two to 10 participants (Groenewald, 2004). As the intention is to explore the experiences of quality managers at institutions of different sizes and geographic locations, purposive sampling was used to select cases (Cohen et al., 2018). Quality managers from two English-language colleges in each of the four geographical regions of Ontario were selected (North, East, West, and the Greater Toronto Area). The

two French-language colleges were not included in the sample as the low fluency of the researcher in French prohibits the ability to perform and present a meaningful analysis. Additionally, the researcher's home college was excluded from the sample.

Two rounds of sampling were completed in order to confirm eight participants. Each of the 21 eligible colleges was assigned a geographical region key (e.g., N-1 for Northern college 1). Using a random number generator (Random.org, n.d.), two colleges from each region were selected. The quality managers from each of the eight colleges selected in the first sample were sent an invitation to participate by email. In order to ensure that participation was voluntary and free from coercion (Cohen et al., 2018), the recruitment emails were sent by a support staff member who reports to the researcher and who was not known by the participants. This provided a degree of separation between the participants and the insider-researcher. The dual role of the insider-researcher was transparent yet limited in this study in terms of its influence on access and recruitment, which aligns most closely with Wilkinson and Kitzinger's (2013) "minimize" strategy.

In the first round of sampling, four out of eight participants were confirmed. In the second round of sampling, four additional potential participants were identified and all four were confirmed. The outcome of the sampling and recruitment process was that two participants from each region – North, East, West, and the Greater Toronto Area – were confirmed to participate in the study.

Two potential participants asked clarifying questions related to document storage and anonymity. Given the nature of the researcher as an insider and the relatively small

population of the potential participants who are generally known to each other through professional networks, the recruitment emails and the informed consent form could have included more detail related to the steps that the researcher planned to take related to the use of the documents and the protection of participant anonymity, such as the use of pseudonyms and other strategies to conceal locations and other potentially identifiable information (Saunders et al., 2015).

Two potential participants had questions related to their suitability for this study. The definition of a quality manager as the role responsible for program review at the operational level could have been more explicitly stated in the recruitment email to clarify that this definition was conceptual and not based on an employee category. Additionally, the institution of one of the participants requested that the researcher apply for approval from their Research Ethics Board. This approval was sought and granted.

3.5   Data Collection

3.5.1   Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection tool for this study. Semi-structured interviews use a standard approach; however, the questions are open-ended and the wording and sequence may be tailored to the individual participant (Cohen et al., 2018). This allows the participants to provide detailed and personal descriptions of their experiences. The interview questions in this study asked the participants to comment on the purpose of quality assurance in post-secondary education, their experiences leading program review processes, their perceived degree of influence

on quality at their institution, and their thoughts on the future of quality assurance in post-secondary education and the role of quality managers in achieving that future.

Sixty-minute interviews were held with each participant using a web-conferencing platform that enables both video recording and an auto-generated transcript. Participants were advised both before and at the beginning of the interview that the recording was enabled. Video interviews are a viable and cost-effective alternative to in-person interviews, particularly for a sample that spans a large geographical region, although the drawbacks to this data collection method are the loss of direct access to the participant's environment and the inability to observe the full range of body language and non-verbal cues (Irani, 2019).

The insider research advantages of familiarity and understanding were present in the interviews. Alvesson (2003) suggests that a research interview is a social situation and this may influence the responses of the participants; they may respond with what they think the researcher wants to hear or feel constrained by social norms related to personal expression. In this case, the researcher as an insider mitigated this issue as it created an environment which felt immediately comfortable and more like a professional-social situation than a data collection process. This is evidenced by the easy rapport and the candid nature of the responses. The participants used language in their responses that acknowledged the researcher's insider status and lived experiences, such as "as you well know" and "I'm sure you've experienced this". Additionally, in the spirit of reciprocity (Cohen et al., 2018), the researcher looked for an opportunity to share a lived experience

with each participant in response to something that the participant identified as a challenge.

In order to mitigate the disadvantages of insider research, including bias, assumptions, and blind spots, and role duality, the researcher was mindful of trying to limit interjections to agree or build on the participant's comments; rather, the researcher primarily listened and considered the responses and asked probing questions to clarify intent and understanding. Given that the researcher is an insider, the interviews did have more dialogue than may be typically present in a research interview led by an "outsider"; however, participants were able to share their experiences and perspectives freely, uninterrupted, and in their own words, which is essential for constructing meaning in phenomenology (Creswell, 1996, as cited in Mercer, 2007).

Furthermore, the dual role of the insider-researcher was transparent and continually acknowledged. Although, as Brannick and Coghlan (2007) note, even in overt situations managing role duality may be difficult as participants know that regardless of the role, they are ultimately speaking with the same person. Participants did in some cases self-edit as they spoke, particularly when making comments that could be perceived as critical of structures or practices, by making comments such as "this is not for the transcript" or "you should probably strike this from the transcript". The participants displayed a level of trust with the insider-researcher and their comments indicate that they felt a sense of control over their narratives. This sense of control was reinforced through member checking.

After the interviews, the researcher validated each transcript. This was a laborious process of reading each line and cross-referencing with the recording as needed to ensure that the words in the transcript were attributed to the correct individual and the transcript accurately reflected the participant's spoken words. The auto-generated transcripts required many small edits to make them as accurate as possible. While this was very time-consuming, it helped the researcher become familiar with the data, setting a solid foundation for the subsequent analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this process, the researcher used square brackets to show the participants where edits for clarity had been made and used strikethrough to transparently show where the researcher had removed information that the participant indicated was to be omitted by saying "this is not for the transcript" or that the researcher deemed to be irrelevant or particularly sensitive.

Additionally, a short summary (600-1000 words) of the participants comments was added to each transcript. While some researchers caution against summarizing verbatim responses (Nagoya University, 2018), member checking helps to validate the accuracy and credibility of the research (Creswell, & Guetterman, 2019). In this case, participants had the opportunity not only to review and edit their verbatim transcripts, but also to read a summary and understand the researcher's initial interpretation of their comments.

3.5.2   Document Collection

In order to compare and contrast the participants' descriptive comments with another piece of data, participants were asked to send one quality assurance process

document that they have prepared, such as a template, set of instructions, or presentation, to the researcher by email. Documents are a valuable source of information in qualitative research as they assist in understanding the central phenomenon and can be used to triangulate other data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). These documents were not reviewed by the researcher until after all interviews were conducted and the initial analysis of the interview comments was completed as their purpose was to validate and corroborate information and themes arising from the interviews (Bowen, 2009).

Participants shared several different types of documents. Four of the documents provided an overview of the program review process, one document was a presentation given by a quality manager when program reviews launch, one document was an instructional workbook to be completed in a meeting facilitated by a quality manager, and one document was a program review planning email sent by a quality manager. One participant was unable to provide a document and alternatively provided website links. The content of the website links was reviewed and ultimately deemed unsuitable for the purposes of this research. The researcher could have provided more detailed instructions and specific criteria in order to help the participants understand the purpose of the document collection and confirm if they had a suitable document.

3.6   Data Analysis

3.6.1   Anonymization and Familiarization

As the participants in this study are included in a relatively small population of individuals who are generally known to each other through professional networks,

anonymization to maintain confidentiality is particularly important to ensure protection from harm (Kaiser, 2009). The process of anonymizing research data consists of changing or omitting identifiable information. This may include names, places, personal details, and other information or characteristics (Saunders et al., 2015). When anonymizing data, researchers must balance two competing priorities: maximizing protection of participant identities with maximizing the value and integrity of the data (Clark, 2006; Kaiser, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015). While anonymity can never be guaranteed (Clark, 2006; Saunders et al., 2015), there are steps that researchers can take to reduce the likelihood of identification.

During anonymization, names are commonly replaced with pseudonyms and locations are replaced with alpha or numeric identifiers, such as College A, or generalized descriptions, such as Eastern College (Saunders et al., 2015). While some researchers may prefer to simply use gender and age range to identify participants, this approach can feel impersonal and make it more difficult for readers to follow individual stories. Pseudonym selection must also be carefully considered. Names have social and cultural significance and different connotations may be applied by readers to the pseudonyms that are selected (Clark, 2006).

When applying pseudonyms to names and locations in research data, a "find and replace" approach is often the totality of the anonymization process. However, the literature suggests that researchers should go beyond this basic approach in order to increase participant protection. For example, Sweeney (1996, as cited in Kaiser, 2009)

suggests that the use of find and replace functionality only captures 30-60% of personally identifiable information when anonymizing medical records. A more manual and nuanced approach is needed in order to recognize and address other potentially identifying personal details (Saunders et al., 2015).

In addition to removing identifiable details, researchers can employ different strategies to further reduce identification, such as including an extract with no pseudonym associated with it if the comment could be seen as contentious, derogatory, or particularly sensitive (Saunders et al., 2015). Furthermore, a "smoke screen" can be used whereby more than one pseudonym is attributed to a participant if there is a concern that attributing multiple extracts to the same participant may increase the possibility of identification.

A copy of each interview transcript was made prior to anonymization in order to preserve the original data. Data was then anonymized using the following process:

1. *Removing references to other institutions*. During the transcript validation process, any references that participants made to other colleges were removed immediately and replaced with "other college" in the transcript.

2. *Replacing participant names with pseudonyms.* Each participant was assigned a primary and a secondary pseudonym. The secondary pseudonym would be used if the researcher felt that a "smoke screen" strategy (Saunders et al., 2015) was necessary to improve participant protection. Pseudonyms were selected from auto-generated lists of names (Random Word Generator, n.d.). The names selected did

not have any overt similarities to any of the actual or potential participants. Rather than the researcher simply inventing names, this approach was used in order to limit the introduction of any unconscious bias. In each transcript the name of the participant was replaced with the primary pseudonym, first using "find and replace" functionality and then reviewing the transcript in detail to ensure no instances were missed due to typographical errors or other reasons. The use of pseudonyms also helped to create distance between the insider-researcher and the participants prior to the data analysis.

3. *Replacing participant institutions with pseudonyms.* Each college was randomly assigned a numeric value from 1 to 8. Alpha indicators were not used to prevent a reader from guessing that the alpha indicator selected represented the first initial of the name of the college. Additionally, generalized descriptions of the colleges (e.g., size, location) were not used as these approaches could increase the risk of identification.

4. *Looking for other potentially identifiable or sensitive information.* Each transcript was then reviewed in detail in order to identify and manually remove or manipulate other information that, alone or in combination with other information, could increase the risk of identification. This included information primarily related to the participant's professional background, quality assurance process details, organizational and reporting structures, size of institution/number of programs, tenure in position, and position type (i.e., faculty or administration).

Additionally, other comments that were deemed to be sensitive or critical were in some cases removed or manipulated. While this approach does negatively impact the integrity of the data (Clark, 2006; Kaiser, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015), it was deemed necessary to increase participant protection and to preserve the trust placed by the participants in the insider-researcher. Insider-researchers must be cognizant of the potential impacts of exposing cultural secrets or airing "dirty laundry" and continually balance research credibility with community accountability (Taylor, 2011).

While this process was more time-consuming than a "find and replace" anonymization approach, it was deemed necessary to improve participant protection as there were many comments related to very specific process details that would make it easy to identify or narrow down the person or institution. This anonymization process also helped the researcher become further immersed in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006) prior to undertaking the analysis.

The quality assurance documents shared by the participants were also anonymized. These documents were not reviewed by the researcher until after all interviews had been completed and all transcripts had been anonymized. A copy of each document was made prior to anonymization in order to preserve the original data. Data was then anonymized by redacting identifiable information, such as people and institution names, titles, and other unique process details or descriptors. In some cases, the font

colours of the document were changed from institutional brand colours to black in order to further anonymize the document.

Additionally, the documents were not associated with the pseudonym of the participant who shared the document, nor the numeric identifier assigned to the institution. As such, extracts from these documents will not be attributed to any individual or institution. As these documents were collected to support codes and themes emerging from the interviews, the researcher determined that adding identifiers to these documents was not necessary. Furthermore, this approach improves participant protection; by using the documents to support the participants' experiences as a whole and not individually, it addresses the concern that attributing multiple data points to the same participant may increase the possibility of identification (Saunders et al., 2015).

3.6.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing and identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke suggest that this method is a highly accessible form of analysis and it is particularly suitable for less experienced qualitative researchers as it is not wedded to any pre-existing theoretical framework, and it does not require detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of approaches. When using this methodology, it is important for the researcher to clarify the theoretical position of the thematic analysis and not leave it unspoken (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sundler et al., 2019). In a phenomenological research study, the entire research process should be guided by the methodological principles of emphasizing openness, questioning pre-understanding, and adopting a reflective attitude (Sundler et al., 2019). Sundler et al. emphasize that, particularly during data analysis, researchers must continually address their natural attitudes and previous assumptions.

When preparing to conduct reflexive thematic analysis, researchers must make several decisions regarding their approach and should be explicit in illuminating their considerations and their choices (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In thematic analysis, themes can be identified using either an inductive or a deductive approach, depending on the preference of the researcher and the objectives of the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Sundler et al. (2019) suggest using an inductive approach for phenomenological research whereby themes are derived using a "bottom up" approach; meanings are identified, marked, and compared and then organized into patterns and themes.

Additionally, Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that researchers should consider whether the "level" of the thematic analysis will be semantic or latent. At the semantic level, themes are identified at the surface level of the data; the data is organized to show patterns in semantic content and interpretation attempts to theorize significance and implications in relation to previous literature. At the latent level, the analysis goes deeper and begins to examine underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations which are shaping or informing the semantic content.

Braun and Clarke (2006) propose a six-step approach for thematic analysis:

1. *Familiarize yourself with the data*. Transcribe the data, read and re-read the texts, note initial ideas.

2. *Generate initial codes*. Code interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion, collating data relevant to each code.

3. *Search for themes*. Collate codes into potential themes.

4. *Review themes*. Check if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set. Generate a thematic map of the analysis.

5. *Define and name themes*. Refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

6. *Produce the report*. Select vivid, compelling extract examples, complete final analysis of selected extracts, relate the analysis back to the research question and literature, and produce a scholarly report of the analysis.

Informed by the works of Braun and Clarke (2006) and Sundler et al. (2019), a reflexive thematic analysis methodology was used to analyze and make meaning of the data set. An inductive approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Sundler et al., 2019) was used to identify patterns and themes from the data, as this approach aligned with the research questions and the purpose of the study which was to understand the experiences of quality managers at Ontario colleges. A latent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was completed, seeking to identify the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations of the participants. This is in line with Finlay's (2012) contention regarding the task of the phenomenological researcher:

> It is the researcher's task to engage the phenomenological attitude to go beyond participants' words and reflections (or words in a text) in order to capture something of implicit horizons of meaning and *pre*reflective experience (i.e., the actual experience before thinking about it). (p. 185)

At every stage of the analysis, the researcher practiced reflexivity. As an insider-researcher, it was sometimes instinctive when reading the texts to immediately consider the comment in the context of her experiences. The researcher would continually acknowledge that she needed to remain open to new understandings (Finlay, 2012; Norlyk & Harder, 2010; Sundler et al., 2019), "rein in" (Finlay, 2012) her experiences and assumptions, and focus on the data. The entire process of marking and coding the extracts was completed over a period of three months. This timeline gave the researcher the opportunity to "dwell" with the data (Finlay, 2012) and progressively develop

understanding through both active analysis (reviewing documents and coding) and passive analysis (reflecting on the data through the course of daily life). Reflexive thematic analysis is a more recursive process that develops over time and it should not be rushed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Additionally, during the data analysis process, the researcher was able to identify and address other potentially identifiable process details that were either missed in error during the anonymization process or not considered at that time. For example, participants have different names and acronyms for their quality assurance review processes. All references were changed to "comprehensive program review" and "annual program review" in the second dataset review in order to minimize identification. In this way, anonymization was not a point in time activity but rather a continuous process completed in parallel with data analysis. The researcher continued to balance maximizing protection of participant identities with maximizing the value and integrity of the data (Clark, 2006; Kaiser, 2009; Saunders et al., 2015), often erring on the side of protection given the insider-research nature of the study.

The following analysis steps were taken, adapted from Braun and Clarke's (2006) proposed approach. The process built upon the familiarity that the researcher gained with the data set during the transcript validation and anonymization process.

1. *Read the texts with openness and mark meanings*. After anonymization, the transcripts were each reviewed, giving full and equal attention to each document (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, the researcher searched for novel

information rather than what was already known or aligned with pre-understanding (Sundler et al., 2019). Meanings were marked using highlights and comments in the documents (Braun & Clarke, 2006); a few descriptive words were added to give the meanings a preliminary name (Sundler et al., 2019) and to ensure context was not lost (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

2. *Review the quality assurance documents with openness and mark meanings:* Six quality assurance documents were analyzed. One participant provided documents that were related to quality assurance practices; however, the nature of the documents and the absence of specific references to the comprehensive program review process made them unsuitable for the purposes of this research. One participant provided a document that did not have sufficient text for it to be analyzed. Meanings in the anonymized documents were marked following the same approach used to annotate the transcripts.

3. *Collate initial meanings and begin assigning codes.* All marked meanings were transferred into a spreadsheet. The structure of the spreadsheet was adapted from Nagoya University's (2018) suggested table for assigning codes to interview text. The columns in the spreadsheet include an extract ID, the extract, the location of the extract (interview or quality assurance document), the page number of the extract in the anonymized document, and the pseudonym associated to the extract (for interview extracts only). It also includes a column for the researcher's notes about the extract and a column to assign a code to the extract (Braun & Clarke,

2006). At this stage, the raw notes were transferred into the "Researcher's Notes" column and a short code was developed to describe each extract. Such "codes identify a feature of the data that appears interesting to the analyst" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). At this stage, coding was unlimited and the researcher attempted to code for as many potential themes as possible (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Care was also taken to not lose the context of the extract, which can be a common criticism of coding, by retaining some of the surrounding data. Additionally, if an extract could be assigned multiple codes, it was added to multiple rows in the spreadsheet with one code per row, to allow for easy sorting and filtering. A total of 508 coded extracts were added (464 from the interview transcripts and 44 from the quality assurance documents).

4. *Refine codes.* After the first round of coding was complete, the codes were refined, grouped, and collapsed in order to help identify patterns and to merge very similar codes. The total number of codes was reduced from 74 to 48. In order to help identify patterns in the data (Sundler et al., 2019), similar codes were given the same group name. For example, all codes related to the traits or approaches of quality managers were labelled quality manager – [trait]. Rather than overwriting the data, the initial extract coding and list of codes were preserved on separate tabs in the spreadsheet.

5. *Read the texts again.* The transcripts and quality assurance documents were then reviewed a second time. The focus of this second review was to focus on the

unmarked sections of the interview transcripts, searching with openness for novel

information that may have been overlooked by the researcher during the first

review. This approach helped the researcher maintain openness and combat

natural tendencies to focus on data that aligned with pre-understanding and

assumptions.

6. *Add new meanings and confirm codes*. An additional 35 meanings were marked in

the interview transcripts and an additional six meanings were marked in the

quality assurance documents. The marked meanings were transferred into the

spreadsheet for a total of 548 coded extracts. In some cases, additional context

was added to extracts that were previously identified. No new codes were

generated.

7. *Search for themes*. The codes were then analyzed as a whole. The researcher

looked for relationships between codes and patterns to start identifying themes

(Braun & Clarke, 2006). A mind map was created to facilitate theme

development. It was first drawn by hand and then recreated and expanded upon in

an electronic format. The intent of the first iteration of the mind map, as shown in

Figure 3, was to identify connections and relationships between codes and to

ensure all codes had a place and purpose in the map.
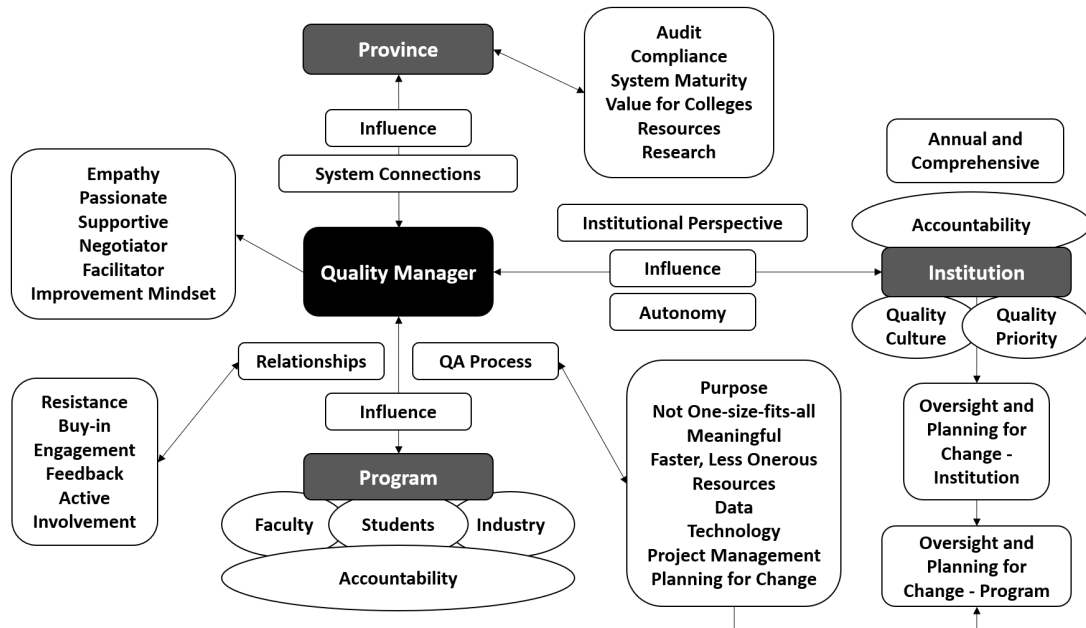
Figure 3. Mind Map Iteration 1 – Relationships Between Codes

The intent of the next iteration of the mind map, as shown in Figure 4, was to

group the codes into candidate themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
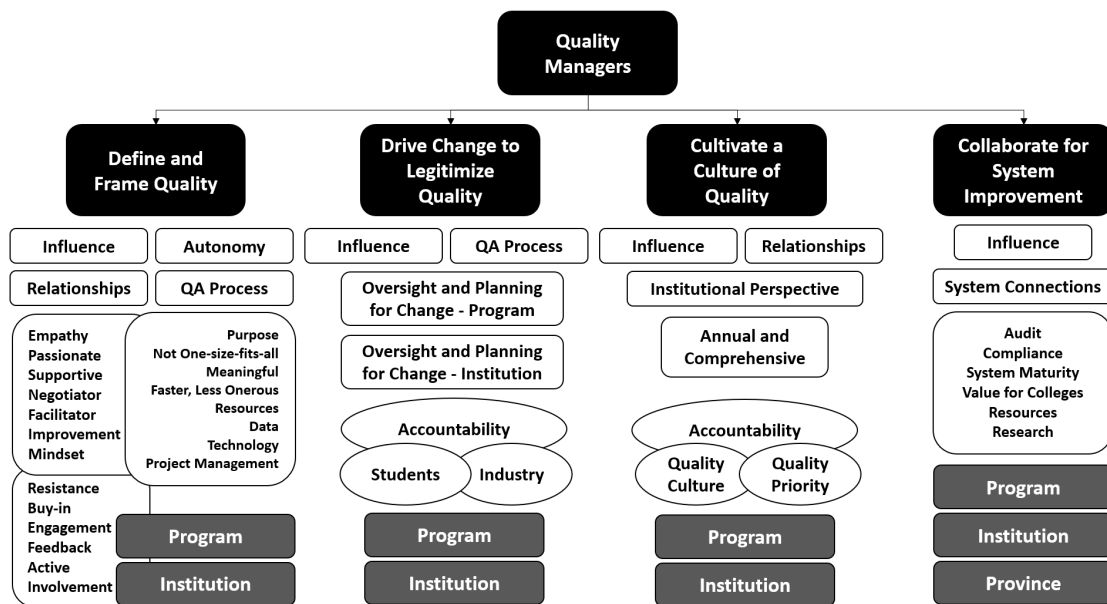
Figure 4. Mind Map Iteration 2 – Candidate Themes

8. *Confirm and name themes*. The final stage of the analysis was to confirm the
    candidate themes by assigning them to the coded extracts to see if the whole forms
    a coherent pattern (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the spreadsheet, one of the four
    candidate themes was assigned to each extract. This activity validated the four
    candidate themes and additionally revealed that some codes were present across
    all four themes. Lastly, the draft names of the candidate themes were revised to
    ensure the labels captured the "essence" of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).
    The final mind map iteration, as shown in Figure 5, shows the relationship
    between the themes and the codes. The final theme names were confirmed as: 1)
    Frame and Enable Program Quality; 2) Drive Program Change; 3) Cultivate a
    Culture of Quality; and 4) Seek System Change.

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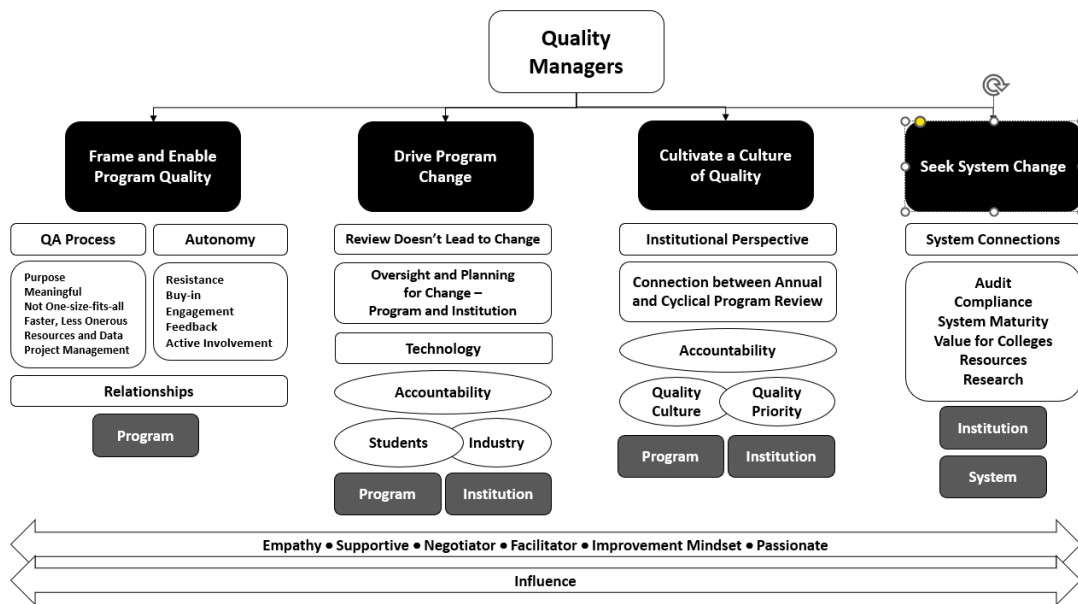
Figure 5. Mind Map Iteration 3 – Final Themes

9. *Prepare to produce the report*. Often in phenomenological research, the results section of the study includes descriptions or "vignettes" of individual participants (Lester, 1999) in order to help the reader "get to know" the participants and to contribute to the rich descriptions (Finlay, 2012) that are expected of a phenomenological study. In this case, participant descriptions were not developed to protect the anonymity of the participants, given the relatively small population of quality managers at Ontario colleges who are generally known to each other through professional networks. In order to bring the readers into a close relationship with the phenomenon (Finlay, 2012) and to sufficiently demonstrate the prevalence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006), vivid examples were carefully selected to walk the reader through the story of each theme and the basis

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of the analysis was on the experiences of the participants as a group rather then the experiences of any one member. Once the results were produced, the researcher employed a "smoke screen" strategy (Saunders et al., 2015) to improve participant protection by including a secondary pseudonym. Participant pseudonyms include: Amanda Brewer, Gina Reynolds, Glenna Foster, Kate Watts, Mike Brown, Rochelle Mosley, Susanne Reid, Tammy Olsen, and Vicki Reyes.

Chapter 4: Results

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the data set.

1. *Quality Managers Frame and Enable Program Quality*: In this theme, patterns emerged related to the participants' experiences with the development and continuous improvement of quality assurance processes, with building relationships and influencing program stakeholders, and with managing or proactively addressing resistance to quality assurance at a program level.

2. *Quality Managers Drive Program Change*: In this theme, patterns emerged related to the participants' past experiences with quality assurance processes not leading to change and with concerted efforts to drive, oversee, and support change at both a program and an institutional level.

3. *Quality Managers Cultivate a Culture of Quality*: In this theme, patterns emerged related to the participants' experiences with building connections between annual and comprehensive quality assurance processes, and with influencing institutional priorities, strategies, and discussions.

4. *Quality Managers Seek System Change*: In this theme, patterns emerged related to the participants' experiences interacting with and supporting other quality managers in the Ontario college system, as well as with influencing provincial quality assurance structures and processes.

These themes and their sub-themes are not independent; data that is presented relating to one theme will also have connections to other themes. Relationships between and across themes will also be presented following the descriptions of the primary themes.

4.1 Theme 1: Quality Managers Frame and Enable Program Quality

Quality managers, personally and through the processes and artifacts that they develop, create the "frame" or "lens" for how program quality assurance is interpreted, positioned, and realized at their institution. As operational managers, the participants spoke at length about their experiences directly overseeing and leading this work at the program level. They shared how they present the concept of quality assurance and the program review process to their stakeholders, how they have continuously improved their processes over time, and the strategies they have used to build relationships with stakeholders to mitigate resistance.

4.1.1 Framing the Purpose and Goals of Quality Assurance

Quality managers are the "face" of quality at their institutions and how they "frame" quality impacts how it is perceived and valued by stakeholders. Participants shared their thoughts on the purpose of quality assurance in post-secondary education and the goal of their program review processes. There was a pattern in the responses of connecting quality assurance with the needs of students, industry, and the community. Additionally, from the beginning there was a pattern in the responses of the participants related to the compliance-improvement tension of quality assurance in post-secondary education.

Kate relates the purpose of quality assurance with the mandate of the Ontario college system, which is to "offer a comprehensive program of career-oriented, post-secondary education and training that: 1) assists individuals in finding and keeping employment; 2) meets the needs of employers and the changing work environment; and 3) supports the economic and social development of their local and diverse communities" (Ontario Ministry of Colleges and Universities, n.d.-b, para. 3). Kate shares:

> I describe the purpose as helping to facilitate, and I guess, ensure if you can use the word ensure, optimal educational experiences for students and for community. So really that core mandate of the college sort of sector, which is that access piece, but also that connection to community and building sustainable communities via people who want to stay and work.

Kate also describes the goal of program review as being both compliance and improvement focused:

> The goal is really to do all of the basic things, which is to make sure you're still in alignment with all of the ministry requirements, your original approval to the extent that you can be, Credential Validation Service requirements, OCQAS requirements, meeting program advisory committee and industry and community and student [needs] and embedding all of those pieces. It's [also] the big opportunity where, if you think it's time to make major changes to a program, then you are able to.

Susanne's responses suggest the purpose of quality assurance as continuous improvement to meet industry and market needs:

> The purpose [of quality assurance] would be to ensure that we're meeting student and market needs by putting in and adapting processes that allow us to be responsive. To ensure that students have a well scaffolded program, many opportunities to practice their skills, and movement into employment. So, the goal of our program review process ... is to really ensure that we are having the most current, the most relevant learning outcomes that align with industry and market needs. Take a comprehensive review of what's happening in the industry, where it's moving to, any of the trends, talk to students around their satisfaction, talk to graduates and really collect information and make decisions based on the data informed practices and create those interpretations. It's a really good opportunity to take a deep dive into the program. Take a look at what's really, really working well, what are the strong components [and] where do we need to build on?

Offering a different perspective, Tammy frames the purpose of quality assurance as ensuring that the credentials conferred by the college have value for the students. Tammy believes that, "[The purpose of quality assurance is that] we want to ensure that the student walks away with a credential that has root value. And then quality assurance kind of does the check to ensure that that is happening." Similarly, Amanda shares her thoughts on how the purpose of quality assurance relates to students:

I strongly and firmly believe that academic quality is meant to serve the students.

And so really looking at that student experience from a holistic lens and really

providing the opportunity for not only faculty or at the program level. But you

know the full sort of wrap around [of the] students' [experiences] to understand …

where there are opportunities to continue to do what we do … and where do we

have opportunities to continue to grow, and perhaps sort of innovate as well.

Amanda also positions program review as having an improvement-focused goal:

I mean, fundamentally, the goal is around enhancements and strengths, and being

able to work towards that in a way that is meaningful [and] driven by data.

In other participant responses, the compliance component of quality assurance

comes through more strongly. Gina states, "I think [the purpose of quality assurance is]

accountability. I think there's an accountability. There are standards across all institutions

[that must be met]." Gina balances this with more emphasis on improvement as the goal

of program review. She states, "So the goal is to identify strengths and weaknesses. It's a

moment for everybody to kind of pause and say what's working, what isn't working. And

also, to create continual improvement and a plan to implement improvement."

Vicki also emphasizes alignment with standards when reflecting on the purpose of

quality assurance:

I think alignment a big purpose. So just making sure that we align with all of the

requirements, so aligning with ministry standards, what's mandated by the

ministry, the vocational learning outcomes that are mandated by the ministry,

aligning with the strategic direction of the college … So really it just all boils

down to alignment and making sure the all the team members, the faculty

members, instructors, administrators, are on the same page and … to make sure

that they're actually delivering what they're advertising to the students.

And Vicki offers a unique perspective on the goal of program review, with an emphasis on faculty communication and collaboration. "I think the biggest goal [program review] is communication. Just make sure that [the faculty are] not teaching in silos, and they understand it's a team effort. So every course instructor who's teaching into the program needs to work collaboratively as a team." Glenna also relates the purpose of quality assurance to student and industry needs:

The main [purpose of quality assurance] for me, and the way that I approach my

role, is continuous improvement, and that continuous improvement is to meet 1:

student demand and 2: industry requirements. Quality assurance helps put a lens

or put the structure on how we do that continuous improvement for those

stakeholders.

She also provides a bit of a tongue-in-cheek comment which highlights how quality managers try to navigate the compliance-improvement tension of quality assurance:

I guess, really, a quality assurance manager should probably say the goal is

compliance with ministry binding policies or the Ontario Qualifications

Framework. But again, for me, my goal is to recognize gaps. Are there gaps in

what it is that we're delivering, and does it need updating? Not only from a

content perspective, but also from a delivery perspective.

Rochelle offers a less light-hearted commentary on the tension of compliance and

improvement, expressing a feeling of disillusionment with what she perceives to be a

more compliance-focused direction:

I think [the purpose of quality assurance] is to ensure that the programs that we're

delivering are consistent and that we are maintaining that level of quality for the

students. So, the student experience, about ensuring the student experience is the

best that it can be, and consistent across – especially in the college sector –

consistent across all colleges, and the outcomes are consistent for employers, and

that graduates are meeting those expectations. So, I think it's compliance … [But]

I wish it wasn't compliance. We've moved into an audit culture in quality

assurance right now, and it shouldn't be. It should be about ensuring that the

student experience is the best that it can be, and that we've done our due diligence

to make sure that we have provided the best opportunities for success for the

graduates as they come out of these programs.

The quality assurance documents also offer insight into how quality managers

frame the purpose of quality assurance and the goals of program review. The analysis of

the quality assurance documents revealed that statements or text related to the purpose of

quality assurance are generally included somewhere in the quality assurance documents,

although these documents tend to be more focused on describing procedures than framing

the purpose of quality assurance. Five of the six documents included text that referenced the purpose of quality assurance, although only two documents specifically included a clear purpose statement at the outset of the document. Document 3 states, "Goal: Purposeful change and continuous improvement!" Document 6 poses the question, "Program Review – Why?" and then positions the purpose as, "Program review is the systematic collection and analysis of data and other program information that leads to continuous program improvement."

Of the other three documents that referenced the purpose of quality assurance, all three included references related to compliance. Document 1 states, "It also ensures the program is in compliance with Ministry program standards and College requirements." Document 2 states, "… ensure compliance with internal and external quality assurance processes." Document 5 refers to "conformity with government requirements", which directly relates the document to provincial quality assurance requirements by referencing one of the six provincial audit standards (Ontario College Quality Assurance Service, 2023).

Conversely, Document 2 and Document 5 also include purpose statements related to improvement, framing the purpose of quality assurance as dual-natured. Document 2 states, "the process allows for critical analysis and reflection, leading to a set of recommendations for program improvement." Document 5 states, "the quality assurance process at [college] is in place to ensure that programs and services delivered to students,

clients and the community are of a high and continuously improving quality that will contribute to the realization of the College's strategic priorities."

4.1.2   Leading and Improving Program Review Processes

Quality managers enjoy a high degree of autonomy in their work. Participants described the freedom and encouragement they are given to lead this work in the best way they see fit. There was a pattern in the responses of continuous improvement of the program review process to make it easier and more meaningful.

Many of the participants describe the benefit of the scope of the autonomy that they have in their roles. Amanda shares:

What I find really incredible in my current role is that it was loosely defined. And so it was a really great opportunity to sort of carve that space out and understand 'what does that look like?' in terms of advancing some of those initiatives around academic quality.

Kate echoes these sentiments, noting that over time the degree of autonomy has slightly shifted:

Our office has had like, huge, huge autonomy in establishing all of these processes. As the years have gone on, certain changes will happen [and requests will be made to alter the process and it's a bit more of a negotiation]. So now it's a little less like, 'do whatever you want', but I swear at first it was, you know, 'do whatever you want', as long as we could justify it, which of course we could, if it came from the right place and the right perspective of quality.

Glenna, Susanne, and Mike each describe how process autonomy has facilitated their ability to make changes to the program review process over time. Glenna shares:

> So, there's been things that I've instituted [in the review process] with no one sort of batting an eyelash. Again, at the ground level, like in terms of the templates that we use, or how we're doing it, or how we're understanding the data [I have lots of autonomy]. And, trust me, I have integrated tons of things [without formal approval]. Sometimes I just kind of sneak things in and just tell people this is the process.

Susanne shares:

> When I inherited the process I was like 'There are some redundancies here', and we don't have a huge team. So we really need to identify what makes the most sense. And where do we need to spend our time. And so I was able to just kind of make some changes and [then] make some [more] changes. I was allowed to go in and make whatever changes [I wanted].

Mike shares:

> I'm supported by my supervisor. They empower me in my position. 'This is your role to guide us and lead us. Make your recommendations.' So I was able to go forward and say 'I'm proposing this, this is what I want to change', or 'I'm proposing these changes' and for the most part they were implemented, and I was told 'Yep, you need to do what you need to do. You are the owner.'

This autonomy, coupled with an improvement mindset that is evident in the participants' responses, reveals a strong pattern of continuous process improvement with a focus on making it more aligned with the needs of individual programs. Many of the participants have recently completed or are currently completing a review of their process. Tammy and Rochelle both indicate an imminent, fulsome review of their processes. Tammy shares, "We are looking to review our entire program review process." Rochelle shares, "We did a kind of review of the process and we're planning to do a deep dive review of our processes in general." Kate notes that she recently completed a review of her process. "I think [the process] is pretty effective. We've just completed a quality review of our process." Additionally, Vicki is currently in the midst of a process review, focused on efficiency and maximizing use of resources. Vicki shares:

> We're actually looking at improving [our program review process]. Right now ...
> I'm tracking how much time is spent on every different aspect of program review.
> It just kind of made us realize we probably should re-evaluate how we are running
> program reviews and see where we can improve the process. So that it's less time
> coordinating and planning the program review and more time on actually making
> change in program modifications and following through on the action items.

Some participants speak to making more incremental improvements and living in a space of always wanting to make the process better. Rochelle connects this thinking with the improvement-focus of program review. "I think in the same way that our programs are constantly needing to be reflecting 'What can we do better?' That's how I

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approached our process. 'How can we do this better?'" Gina similarly approaches her work with an improvement mindset. "I alter our template on a regular basis, based on feedback. I'm constantly taking that feedback to refine the template, so that it's more effective … There's always a million things you can do to make [the process] better."

Participants discuss different drivers for process improvement, including the onerous nature of program quality review, the amount of time it takes to complete, and the length of the reports. Amanda describes the heavy nature of quality assurance processes as follows: "These processes that we have are really seen as like a burden. They're very heavy. They're very involved. They require a lot of resourcing. They're very intense." Tammy offers a similar perspective:

> I think sometimes these program reviews are clunky in a way, like so huge and overwhelming, and so much information and data. And that's being looked at one time – that's not necessarily being considered every year. So I think streamlining [the] processes more - where it's not just one big review, but it's like smaller chunks of reviews and check-ins.

Relatedly, Glenna expresses as desire to shorten the length of the process in this way: "I would really love to shorten the length of time. So, if I'm just thinking about how long the process is, it's a long time for that momentum and bringing all of those different stakeholders together."

Several participants highlight the challenge of producing very long program review reports. Gina suggests that this is something that many quality managers are

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grappling with: "We've all kind of had that really large document. How do you pare that down into something that's manageable?" Rochelle suggests that asking faculty to produce these long reports is not appropriate: "We've talked about this before. A 100-page report. Why are we expecting that of our faculty? Our faculty are teachers. They need to be in the classroom." Tammy offers a similar perspective, although from a more self-interested (and light-hearted) perspective: "We are also trying to condense the report itself because I don't want to read them … So, we're trying to develop [a new template] to be more efficient."

The participants share different approaches they have taken to make the process more efficient. Gina shares that by personally taking a more hands-on approach she's been able to reduce the timeline:

> I think my role of guiding it – which was my role before – [but] I've dug in a bit
> deeper now. What we used to do is I would guide them and say, this is your due
> date. If you have any questions about it, let me know. But now I work with them
> and go, 'You know, maybe you could expand this thought. Maybe this part isn't
> clear.' So, providing a little extra guidance has moved the program reviews
> through much quicker, and I think given everybody a bit more confidence, too.

Mike also discusses a shift he has taken from a more passive to a more active role in leading the process:

> I see our role as project managers to help [the faculty] get to the endpoint. And in
> the past it's been 'Well, that's the department area's job to make sure they get

there, and if they don't achieve it, well, it's not [our responsibility]. And I'm like 'No'. In my opinion we are – what do they call that? Servant leadership. We are for customer service, and it's our job to make sure that they achieve success.

Susanne echoes these comments of becoming more involved to ensure the review progresses, using her own analogy:

You know. I spend a lot of time chasing. Sometimes I feel like a mosquito. I'm like, 'Where's this? Where's this? Oh, how about we do this? Yay! Here, let me fill it out for you.' … I have no problem taking on whatever role I need to take [to move the review forward]."

However, the purpose of the improvements is not solely related to efficiency; the participants express a desire to make the program review process valuable for each program. Patterns emerged related to making quality assurance processes meaningful and tailored to the unique nature and needs of each program. Glenna positions the process as the vehicle for faculty concerns to be heard:

[The faculty] feel like no one's listened. They're burnt out from the pandemic where they had to work nights and weekends to get people through practicums and just like, on and on. It's frustration that they're not being listened to or heard. So I try to explain it. 'This is the process for being listened to, because it's one of the big processes at the institution that is mandated, which is fantastic, because then there's supports and resources to make sure that it works.'

Amanda shares how she tries to help faculty see the value of the process:

I'm really trying to sort of change the narrative and say it's not about compliance. It's about opportunity. Really having these deep, meaningful conversations around their program and the students and that experience … Just trying to have some very intentional opportunities to have discussions with programs to be able to perhaps bring a different lens around some of these activities across the process ... sometimes it's just about seeing the value in what you're doing, right, and sometimes it's just not so obvious and so really helping to draw that out.

Kate draws a direct connection between creating meaningful quality assurance processes and stakeholder buy-in with the following observation: "It was really looking at quality from 'how does it benefit everybody?' Including you faculty, including you support staff, including you administrators. So, the idea was that people never felt like there wasn't a benefit, so buy-in was huge."

Participants also describe how they adapt the program review process to the needs of different programs and stakeholders. Amanda suggests:

We have to meet programs and individuals where they're at, and that will look different across faculties and programs. It's recognizing the experience that they're coming in with, where they're at as a unit, as a department, as a program in their own lifecycle … But I am recognizing that the narrative around quality has changed quite a bit over the last decade, going from more so that compliance bit to 'Let's talk about where you're at as a program and let's see what makes sense for you.'

Gina reflects on this from the perspective of the different types of process

outcomes that she sees: "When you do program review, some groups really hit into the

really granular detail, and then others really, just think more high level, and I think both

program reviews are fantastic. They're just different." Glenna and Kate both speak to

tailoring the process to specific program needs. Glenna shares how she offers to expand

the process based on program needs: "So what does everyone know? Where are we

going? What are your questions or concerns? Are there other pieces of data that we need

to gather that's not part of our regular process?" Alternatively, Kate seeks to remove

aspects that may not relevant:

> You just can't make people jump through every hoop. If they don't need to jump
>
> through that hoop … it's not to do it for the sake of doing it. So definitely don't
>
> like it to be a check box exercise. It just has to be valuable, has to help the
>
> program.

Glenna also offers a different perspective on why it is important to understanding where

the program is at during program review:

> I want to know the strategic direction for the program. I want to know, before I
>
> enter in a year-long process, how to guide and facilitate the conversation. [If a
>
> program is at-risk] and I come at it with a really rose-coloured [approach], that
>
> enthusiasm is not necessarily the tone that I should have set for that team.

In order to surface the information she needs, Glenna is strategic in how she approaches

her first conversation with the faculty:

When I bring the team in together, we have a set of initial questions to see where

the team is at so sometimes I'll tweak that just to get the temperature of the room.

So that's always new and interesting as I sort of navigate different teams."

Susanne agrees: "Everyone's in a different place, and it's just so interesting to start in all

these different places [and meet people] where they're at."

However, none of the quality assurance documents provided include information

related to tailoring the review to the needs of the program or related to improvement of

the process itself.

4.1.3 Building Relationships with Stakeholders

Quality managers work with many different stakeholders across their institutions.

Participants described the strategies they use to build relationships and manage resistance

to quality assurance. There was a pattern in the responses of empathy, support, trust, and

building excitement for program review.

The participants describe the different types of resistance they encounter. In some

cases, the history of program reviews not leading to change contributes to resistance.

Gina shares her experience as follows: "There was another issue that program areas had.

'Oh, we've done this before. No one looks at them.' You know, there was this kind of

sense of 'What's the point? You're wasting my time.'" Glenna describes encountering

similar feedback: "When I first started, I heard 'Nothing happens, nothing ever changes.'

I'm like oh, no, that shouldn't be the case."

Similarly, the perception of quality assurance being more focused on compliance than improvement can be a source of resistance. Amanda shares, "I am constantly sort of working up against this narrative [around program review] or quality. [That] it's just such a compliance piece." Vicki offers a similar perspective: "A lot of the team members think that it's just a make work exercise and don't really understand the big picture. So the frustrating part is getting buy-in from everyone and getting them to see how it will benefit them." Rochelle also speaks to the value of quality assurance not always being clear: "You get buy-in from some faculty, you get buy-in from some program leads, and then you get push back from some teams. To that point: 'Why am I doing this? Why do I have to do this?'"

Rochelle also describes how resistance can come from a place of quality assurance activities being seen as a lower priority for stakeholders who are already at or over capacity: "There are challenges because you've got staff that don't always see the value. Program administrators that are so swamped that they don't have opportunity to provide the assistance, the support that we need as a partnership." Vicki shares a similar perspective: "[Program review] is probably a lower priority for [the faculty assigned to lead it], because it's not student-facing." She describes how she feels when encountering resistance and lack of buy-in from stakeholders:

But I think that's the most frustrating part – is not getting buy-in from the entire faculty team, not getting buy-in from the [program administrators] to really

reinforce how important this is, and how it can actually make a difference for them as well.

To combat these challenges, the participants describe different approaches they take to secure buy-in and help stakeholders see the value in program review. There was a pattern in the responses related to support and assistance; quality managers position themselves as being there to help the stakeholders through the process. Gina describes the friendly approach she takes in supporting faculty:

> [I'm] calming everybody down at the beginning, setting the expectations, assuring them that it's painless, and assuring them that I'm also available [anytime]. If you're working through it at any point, you just have a quick question, rather than losing your momentum … just drop me a quick note. And I think just that sort of friendliness that they get through the process that I think it's lightened their load and [made them feel] they weren't just sort of drowning.

Glenna specifically positions herself as a supporter, as opposed to a leader, with the stakeholders: "Rather than leading it, I'm there to support you through this process. Because to me the leaders are [the program administrators], program lead, and the program team." She notes how over time there's been "some trust building with the [program administrators], and they know me now. They tell me what I need to know so I can really make the best of this process for everyone."

Trust emerges as a pattern in the responses related to relationships. Tammy notes, "There's a lot [of importance], I think, in that relationship building and building the

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trust." Susanne shares. "The nice thing about having that autonomy [is] how [stakeholders] really truly trust in the process and in the work." Rochelle shares that she "went out and got feedback from the [program administrators], so I built that trust and that relationship when I was making [process] changes."

Glenna also describes the support she offers the review lead:

I have a really good relationship with [faculty] lead. So I meet with them and we just go through [the activities] making sure that they're [completing them]. And so then I'll get a sense too of what's happening on the ground. And I think they appreciate having someone support them through that big, long process.

Mike similarly emphasizes his supportive role and the need for stakeholders to engage in the process:

Listen, I'm here as a support. Yes, it's my responsibility to help you cross the finish line, but I'm not going to punish you if you don't cross the finish line. But there are going to be repercussions if you don't cross the finish line, and that could mean a relaunch. That's fine. We'll help you get through that, too. But you've got to work with us because we've got these processes and supports in place to help you.

Kate simply describes her support role as being focused on "problem solving and just helping program teams do the things that they want to do."

Many of the participants also describe taking an empathetic approach to their work. Glenna shares how she engages with faculty. "So in terms of supporting that team.

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You know, through the force of my personality and my belief in continuous improvement … As you listen [to faculty describing challenges], you know, [saying] 'I hear you'. 'I understand.'" Tammy similarly describes making efforts to understand stakeholders:

> Just kind of getting an idea of what [stakeholders are] thinking and where their hurdles are. And so I think, continuously keeping people part of the process, communicating with them … is really probably the only way, I think, to be able to get buy-in.

Taking an even more human-centred approach, Susanne describes how she leads with kindness:

> If someone's having a really, really hard time, we've got to remember the human piece. Like, we work with people. And if we can demonstrate a little bit of kindness and give them that support where they need, they just come back on.

Rochelle offers a similar perspective:

> You've got to lead with compassion. Because ... everybody is trying to do their best. Everybody is going in with the best of intentions, trying to put their best foot forward, trying to do their best work. Prioritizing in the best way that they know how. And so, knowing that, how do I help them do that?

In the quality assurance documents, there is some supporting evidence of this focus on building stakeholder relationships to manage resistance. Document 3 and Document 6 both highlight the expertise and on-going efforts of faculty and program administrators and position program review as a complement to this work. Document 3

states that program review is "recognizing and building on the valuable work already being done." Similarly, Document 6 states:

> Even though Faculty are constantly 'reviewing' their program, the program review process makes these informal activities more systematic, more public and allows connections to be made across data sets and other information sources. … After all, program faculty and [program administrators] have an incredible understanding of how their program is functioning.

4.1.4   Theme Summary

Consequently, what is the outcome of the efforts that quality managers are making to frame and enable quality? Participants shared some of the feedback they receive from stakeholders related to the process. Kate notes, "[Stakeholder perception of the process] is very, very positive, I think. Even when it's a bit of a headache. But at the end they're always very appreciative." Susanne shares:

> And [the faculty are] like 'We have never loved it as we're loving this right now. It is so clean; it hits all the points that we need to cover." So even the feedback has been good, and I don't find that faculty are going 'This is too much.' They're saying, 'You know what, it's a lot, but we're really supported and we're getting something out of it.'

Amanda also shares the positive feedback she receives at the end of the process. "At the end of it, the faculties are like. 'Well, that was a lot to take on. But, wow! Like incredible work that we've done here.' There is definitely an appreciation for the process [at the

end]." Rochelle concludes, "When you get to that end and you've got that report and the faculty come and say 'Well I'm glad I did this and we've got these outcomes. And now how do we move it through?' That part has been rewarding."

This relates to a pattern in the responses of stakeholders additionally seeking support from quality managers in planning for and completing program change, in part to avoid the challenges of the past where reviews did not lead to change, and in part as an acknowledgement of the effective support offered by quality managers. This leads to the next theme related to driving program change.

4.2   Theme 2: Quality Managers Drive Program Change

Quality managers want to feel like their work has an impact. Just as faculty don't want to complete a program quality assurance process because they "have to", quality managers want program review to lead to meaningful change. Participants described different approaches they are taking and the processes they are creating and influencing to ensure program review leads to program change and has an impact on students, industry, and the community, which participants noted as one of the primary purposes of quality assurance in post-secondary education.

4.2.1   *"Marrying" Program Review and Program Change*

Quality managers want a closer connection between program review and program change. Participants described the importance of bringing these two activities closer together in response to observed challenges with following through on program change.

There was a pattern in the responses of process improvements related to change, responsibilities for monitoring change, and accountability for change.

Glenna uses the "marriage" analogy to describes how she is always thinking ahead to program change and working to connect the two processes:

> So to me, when there's a gap identified, I look to the next step. So where are we making change? And then how do we get that those changes implemented for the next cycle? So, I like to marry that process of review and renewal … it used to be very separate.

She elaborates that this means she is overlapping the review and renewal processes with the following: "So, as they were writing their [report], we were basically at the same time planning for the change. I'm kind of forcing the change process." This approach is in response to the requests Glenna receives for program change support. She shares:

> Because faculty teams will say to me [when the review is done]. 'So what do I do now?' I say, 'Talk to your [program administrator]. Who [is listed] on your action items? Who did you say was responsible for that?' But they're like, 'keep holding my hand.'

Vicki's comments also point to this shift towards connecting program review and program change. She shares, "We're trying to streamline [program review], make it less onerous and more efficient and less time consuming, so that we can actually spend more time on action planning." These efforts are in direct response to observed challenges with

program review not leading to program change. She shares, "People forget, they finish program review, and they're like 'done and move on', and nothing gets changed."

Amanda draws linkages between the processes by positioning program review as only the first step:

> And then, [helping faculty understand] that beyond [program review], it continues. It doesn't just sort of start and end with [program review]. This is the start of what will be the work of the program to be able to continue to enhance and improve.

She also discusses how in the past this work was not always undertaken following the review:

> Some things were probably advancing, some were not, some were forgotten, and so there was just really was no way to understand one, the effectiveness [of the process], but two, if programs were achieving the goals that they set out to do in implementation. The action plan wasn't going anywhere beyond the program. So it sort of just lives, and you know, in some ways like, I hate to say it, but kind of dies with the program, and there's just sort of like no oversight on that.

Gina also believes that program change is an effectiveness measure of the program review process:

> Then the other thing is the implementation plan. If it's effective, [faculty] understand that the program review lives with the program areas, and they need to follow their plan. So if the plan is being followed, and they tell me 'We took our

implementation plan. It's on our bulletin board, and we bring it to our department

meetings.' Then that's effective, and if things are getting done, it's effective.

Susanne describes how it's part of her role to ensure that programs follow through

on their change plans and how she draws on her interpersonal skills to keep the

momentum going:

> Because what ends up happening is that you make all these recommendations, and
>
> you have to keep that momentum going so they actually follow through.
>
> Otherwise, because everyone's busy, things fall off the side. So part of my role is
>
> to make sure that it is followed through, and then kind of circle back and do those
>
> double checks. And you know, when I see the excitement waning, I bring out my
>
> enthusiasm.

She also leverages the review documentation to facilitate program change:

> I've changed the recommendations … to kind of break it right down into the key
>
> components. Broke down the steps, the implementation staff, the timeline, who's
>
> responsible, and then how it's going to be monitored.

And beyond this detailed planning, Susanne also monitors their progress related to

program change. She shares, "And then, you know, then I follow them. … So we follow

the plan and make sure all the action items are covered."

Glenna also discusses program change from an accountability perspective. She

states, "If you take a deep dive, you're doing the analysis, I want to make sure that we do

see change, because our stakeholders are going to want to see change." Alternatively,

Tammy discusses accountability from a program perspective. She would like to see "more ownership on the academic teams. What I find right now is that we own it a lot more, and I think we need to kind of give it back a little bit to the faculty side." And Amanda discusses accountability from an institutional support perspective. She states:

> Post-[review], once action plans are developed, they're actually now planned, supported and resourced at the institutional level to better understand where does this fit and how can this be supported? There's more accountability around being able to ensure that these things are looked at regularly.

Three of the quality assurance documents also include references to program change and accountability. Document 1 references accountability in the program review report writing section. It states that this stage of the review process is the "report finalization, program action plan, and accountability phase." Document 2 notes that preparing the program change documentation is a step in the program review process. And Document 4 describes the requirement of submitting a one-year implementation report for approval.

4.2.2   Supporting Program Change

Quality managers are extending their processes and their scope of influence through to program change. Participants describe additional supports, oversight, and resources to support change, at both a program and an institutional level. There was a pattern in the participant responses related to creating internal visibility, facilitating resource planning, and leveraging technology.

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Amanda similarly describes a shift towards focusing on and supporting program change at her institution. She states:

> [Previously], action plans were done in a bit of in a silo with [the QA team] and the program. But beyond that there was not really an opportunity to have that sort of larger institutional lens on action plans and institutional stakeholders required to support implementation.

Amanda shares that now there is a different level of oversight, and she describes how program review now enables program and institutional decision-making. She states:

> The program and the institution have an opportunity to make some decisions around resources that are really linking back to having identified what those needs are [through program review]. There's been a huge shift in the approach the institution is taking to support the implementation of action plans as a result of [program review].

Glenna also speaks to the need to give internal departments more visibility into the outcomes of program review: "So if it's around admissions and enrolment and recruitment, well, we need a mechanism to give our internal departments visibility so they are prepared to support." She describes how she completes her own data analysis to create this visibility at an institutional level: "I'll take a whole faculty and all of their action items will be itemized and then they can see 'Huh! Capital is really big this year.' And then they can drill down to see what programs are requesting capital purchases." However, this work is quite manual and onerous. Glenna shares, "Right now my themes

are all in Excel. It's a nightmare. So I would love for us to be more digital." Susanne

expresses a similar desire to leverage technology to support implementation oversight. "I

really want an automated process, especially for the action plan. I would like an

automated process for the whole thing, but I would accept the action plan."

Amanda's institution has invested in technology to create visibility and facilitate

planning. She shares:

> Now we have that [system] built out, and we're just now starting to be able to
>
> generate these reports [that show where internal departments are needed to
>
> provide support]. And so it's been a really wonderful tool to have, because it's
>
> again like a line of sight on what's coming your way. Which again just provides
>
> the program with an opportunity to be able to ensure that engagement with
>
> stakeholders to support implementation. So again, breaking those silos.

Vicki describes a similar use of technology to enable program review action plan

monitoring. She shares:

> Probably one of the more noticeable changes we've made recently is our action
>
> planning. We've created an action plan system so that we can better track the
>
> action items. We send reminders every semester to remind them that you have
>
> these action items that are still outstanding…. And that's just for the purpose of
>
> planning their resources…. So hopefully this will give us a little more
>
> oversight…. It's a place for us to visually look at how we're progressing with our

action items and make decisions based on trends that we're seeing. Like we can see which departments, which supporting departments, are needed.

Alternatively, Gina and Glenna discuss the connection between program review implementation and operational planning. Rather than building new systems and process, they reflect on how to connect this work with existing mechanisms. Glenna notes that "one team did say to me 'align it to my operational work.'" Gina shares that her institution is considering how to build these connections: "What mechanism do we have in place to flow program review [outcomes] into [operations]? … I don't think our program review can live isolated from [operational planning]." She predicts "that higher level [actions] will wind up in [operational planning], and more immediate [actions] will wind up managed more locally with the program review teams."

Only two of the quality assurance documents include specific references to program change planning, support, or oversight. Document 1 notes, "Recommendations related to corporate and student services shared with relevant stakeholders." Document 5 states that program review contributes "to the efficient and effective use of resources and informative planning and budgeting."

4.2.3   Theme Summary

Why are Quality Managers extending their focus, efforts, and influence through to the program change process? There was a pattern in the participant responses related to impact. Amanda shares, "[We want to ensure] these action plans are meaningful, but also that we have effective measures in place to be able to measure the success of what the

program is doing." Vicki shares that one of the most gratifying aspects of her role is seeing program change. She states:

> It's rewarding because, at the end, when you do identify those gaps, you actually use it to as a basis for your action plan, and you actually get to see the action plans come to fruition. So it's rewarding that way.

Glenna offers a similar perspective, seeking not only to support program change but also to influence institutional change. She shares:

> I would love for more themes. I would like to then take all the [program review outcomes] and extract [them], so I can come up with some nice high-level institutional strategies or send all the action items related to internal departments.

> This desire to influence change beyond the program level relates to a pattern in the responses of quality managers seeking to exercise a greater degree of influence across the institution. This leads to the next theme related to cultivating a culture of quality.

4.3   Theme 3: Quality Managers Cultivate a Culture of Quality

Quality managers see the opportunity for quality to be positioned more broadly and strategically across the institution. Rather than just a point-in-time process or activity, the participants express a desire for quality to been seen and understood as more universal and directly related to daily work. In this theme, patterns emerged related to the participants' experiences with building connections between annual and comprehensive quality assurance processes, and with influencing institutional priorities, strategies, and discussions.

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4.3.1   *Connecting Annual and Cyclical Program Review*

Many Ontario colleges have an annual program review process in addition to a cyclical program review process. Quality managers discussed the imbalance and the disconnect between these two processes and the need for stronger links between them. Kate discusses the current state of annual and cyclical program review at her institution and shares how she would like to see these two processes work together in the future.

> Our annual process is quite limited. So the cyclical program review process has kind of been a catch all for everything. So trying to [get to] where cyclical program review is still that opportunity [for a deep dive]. But you're going to be better lined up for it [if] we're able to maintain more annually [and] we won't necessarily need to do so much work every five years.

Kate reflects on how this imbalance contributes to the perception of program review being large and onerous.

> You're relying on this massive [program review], and then sometimes you look at the kinds of things [programs] want to do, and everybody's all 'wait a second – that's just too much at this point', even though, if [they] had been maintaining [the program annually], it wouldn't seem so large.

Tammy echoes these sentiments. She shares, "If we're just in our annual adding a little bit more pieces that inform the cyclical, then it doesn't need to be as labor intensive." She considers the need to rebalance these processes "… where it's not just one big review, but it's like smaller chunks of reviews and check-ins."

Susanne similarly reflects on the connection between these processes at her

institution.

> You have the [program review documents] that follow them until they're done,
>
> and they weave back into the annual…. Right now [annual and cyclical] both
>
> work. They both serve a different process. People think that they align but I don't
>
> think that they align as nicely as I would like them to."

Vicki, as part of the program review process improvements she previously spoke to, is

currently redistributing activities between annual and cyclical program review.

> Right now [we're] in the middle of changing an annual process which is going to
>
> sort of take a lot of the difficult piece of program review out … The heavy lifting
>
> is going to be done annually with the [program administrators].

> Only two of the quality assurance documents reference annual program review.

Document 1 states, "Recommendations monitored through the annual process…" and

Document 5 states that one of the program review processes at the institution is an

"Annual Program Curriculum [review]".

4.3.2   *Influencing Institutional Activities and Priorities*

Quality managers build up a breadth of knowledge and experience over time as

they support program review. There was a pattern in the responses related to connecting

program review with institutional priorities, as well as using personal influence to affect

institutional change. Kate describes how she connects program review with institutional

priorities. She shares:

Obviously institutional priorities are really key. So sometimes we spend a ton of

time looking at those. We definitely don't see ourselves as the experts in anything

other than the quality piece and the curriculum piece. So we don't sit there and

prescribe what they should do in terms of those institutional priorities. But we

definitely make sure that we're working with those areas to provide what might be

necessary for teams and to give teams the appropriate tools and language. So we

help those other areas of the college develop materials that would help in those

[strategic] contexts.

She goes on to describe how specifically she sees an opportunity for program review to

be more connected with program planning: "It probably needs a little more strategic

oversight, a little more connectivity with … those conversations around program mix and

what opportunities there are for improvement. I'd like to see [program review] connected

more to the integrated planning process."

Amanda and Rochelle similarly describe how program review can be a vehicle for

exploring innovation and connecting with institutional strategies. Amanda shares:

[Let's] use [program review] as an opportunity to maybe start discussions around

some of these more innovative pieces…. Let's talk about three-year degrees. So

now we're just kind of thinking, okay, as a strategy, as an institution, as a

program. What does that look like? And so leveraging [program review] to be able

to have some of these [more innovative] conversations.

Rochelle shares:

We are in a state now, and in a situation where we're trying to now become

strategic institutionally, not just within the context of one discipline or one field of

discipline. So that is challenging, trying to help [programs] to see [that connection

during program review]. You want to make this decision. But … does that support

[institutional] academic goals?

Glenna then reflects on how the outcomes of program review impact the institution. She

shares, "I want to understand my work and my role around [recommendations] as well,

because I want ... the big departments to understand this is how these recommendations

are going to now impact the rest of the college." Similarly, Vicki believes that in the

future, quality managers will need to have more of an institutional lens. "So instead of

working in silos and just looking program by program, we're going to have to be able to

notice things for the whole school, holistically and quickly."

Participants also described their perceived degree or span of personal influence at

their institutions. Amanda reflects, "So my ability to be able to influence. I've definitely

felt a shift and a change in that space [over time]. In informing a lot of these various

[institutional] initiatives and processes. Kate notes:

We're asked to weigh in on a lot of things, and I do believe they take our opinions

very seriously. We don't have real power in these positions, so we have to rely on

influence, and we get the privilege of working with every type of program, every

credential, every discipline. And so then you just actually have so much

information. So I try to equally stay plugged into a lot of different committees at the college.

Tammy and Susanne also speak to having a high degree of influence that is built over time. Tammy shares, "I have been able to utilize the relationship building skills that I have to gain that respect. But it, you know it comes with time. It's not a quick. But a big piece of that part is ... communicating to the college, and sort of being ... in the forefront. Susanne shares, "I am kind of their 'go-to' person. Being the main [QA] person and having the relationships. I think I can influence [other stakeholders] well. But I really feel it needs to come top down."

Susanne goes on the describe how she ultimately does not have as much influence as she would like. She shares, "I don't think I'd have to be a mosquito if [my influence] was really effective. I think it could be stronger if we all spoke the same language consistently and maintained [quality] as an imminent priority." She recalls "When the audit happened, it was like 'that's Susanne's project'. [And I was like] no, that's not 'Susanne's project'. I was surprised that I didn't have the [senior leadership] trying to kind of increase the awareness at that higher level." Glenna also expresses some frustration with not being able to influence action: "I see the data all the time. And I'm like 'I think we should do something institutionally. I'd really like to investigate this.' But it never goes further."

Most of the quality assurance documents do not describe how program review supports, connects to, or influences institutional priorities. Only Document 5 includes language related to strategic priorities. It states:

> The quality assurance process at [College] is in place to ensure that programs and services delivered to students, clients and the community are of a high and continuously improving quality that will contribute to the realization of the College's strategic priorities.

4.3.3 "Transmitting" a Culture of Quality

Quality managers seek to influence not only the initiatives and priorities of their institutions, but also to influence the very fabric and nature of their institutions at a cultural level. Participants described how they are trying to build and influence a culture of quality at their institutions. Tammy discusses the importance of keeping quality assurance visible.

> I found that in the past our QA area was kind of behind the scenes, and I want to be seen more. I'm being mindful of, and actually planning on how we can be in their minds, because it all comes [down to] 'How are we transmitting a culture of quality?'

Susanne and Amanda share similar perspectives about the importance of keeping quality visible. Susanne shares, "[When quality assurance is] at the end of the agenda, that makes a difference for QA ... it's not setting the stage for the importance of quality." Amanda reflects:

What I've learned over time in my role is that not only are we there to guide and

support faculty through a process. It's more. It's also that sort of community

outreach piece in being able to put forward that narrative … [around] what is

academic quality and what does that look like?

The participants described what a culture of quality looks and feels like from their

perspectives. Tammy shares:

Quality is just continuously state of mind. It's not just [a] check in … It should

just be [that] everyone should be thinking quality [all the time], instead of waiting

for, every five years or six years.

Kate offers, "A culture of quality [is] having people see that all of those pieces are

actually to serve students. So [quality is] not something that's forced on you. It's

something that makes sense for every single person, in every single role." Amanda

agrees.

[Our goals] around building this culture of academic quality and socializing the

processes, in a way where, whether you are a faculty member, whether you are a

student, whoever you are ... you understand the impacts and the importance of

[quality] on your daily experiences or the work that you do.

Rochelle reflects, "I have been able to influence and make change, and I've had [program

administrators] come up and say, 'Listen, thank you. You're creating transparency.

You're creating a supported culture of quality. We see the work that you're doing to make

sure that our work is supported and done well.'" Finally, Amanda summarizes:

[We need to] get away from this focus that quality just lives in review. In fact, quality lives in everything that we do…. Building a culture of academic quality – if you've achieved that, you sort of achieve the goal, the gold standard of quality. There's engagement at all levels and there is really, truly an understanding of how quality impacts you in your work.

Only one quality assurance documents include references to culture. Document 3 draws a direct connection between program review and a culture of quality. On the first page "Program Review" is the title and "Driving a Culture of Continuous Improvement" is the subtitle. The word "culture" also appears twice in a section related to program review benefits. The document states that program review "contributes to a culture of self-reflection and research-based inquiry (improvements occur as a result of data collection and analysis)" and "promotes a practice and culture of continuous program assessment and improvement."

4.3.4   Theme Summary

Quality managers are looking at the bigger picture. They see the connections between program review, program change, and other processes and mechanisms at their institutions. As Kate states, "[As a quality manager] you've got your eye on the whole. All the tendrils that reach out." Furthermore, quality managers see how quality assurance activities can help inform and support institutional priorities, Amanda suggests, "There is a lot more appreciation [needed], [and more] supports needed at an institutional level, to

support the various initiatives or activities that [will] help to further develop our culture [of quality].

Is seeking more supports and resources to support a culture of quality realistic? Mike offers his perspective on how quality is, and should be, resourced at Ontario colleges. He shares:

Financially, we're all in the same situation. The budgets are all in the same situation. Nobody has money. Nobody is being given money to do [quality] work, and yet we're being asked to do more and more and more programs being developed, and more and more work is being put on the quality people, but no more resources are being added. So I think that as a system that needs to be prioritized. If this work is so important, then the college presidents and the college leadership need to value it and invest and have a model that supports it…. We need to have a quality assurance resourcing approach that's equitable across all colleges.

This desire to influence change at a system level relates to a pattern in the responses of quality managers working together to support each other and to effect change at a provincial level. This leads to the next theme related to sharing and collaborating.

4.4   Theme 4: Quality Managers Seek System Change

Quality managers are coming together. They are reaching out and building relationships that benefit each other as individuals and that benefit institutional quality assurance practices. Participants described the empathy they feel for each other in these

roles and the value they place on sharing and helping each other. There was also a pattern in the participant responses related to a desire for more formal opportunities to collaborate and to influence provincial quality structures and processes, in order to apply the same quality assurance continuous improvement mindset and realize the same benefits of buy-in and impact at this level.

This theme does not include an analysis of the quality assurance documents. None of the documents included any references to cross-system collaborations or system influence.

4.4.1   *Helping and Supporting Each Other*

Quality managers value the experiences and perspectives of their peers across the Ontario college system. There was a pattern in the responses related to reaching out, sharing, and supporting each other in order to identify best practices and strategies for managing similar challenges in program review. Gina shares her perspective on the benefit of Quality managers collaborating:

> I think it's great that we are sharing and we kind of put ourselves empathetically in everybody else's shoes to say 'What's working for you? What isn't working?'… Every time you share … next person doesn't have to reinvent the wheel every time. And if I say, 'Hey, it works at my college', you can more confidently try [it at] your college because if mine's tried and true and it's successful and somebody else has something else that's tried and true and it's

working really well, all we just need to do is find all those little widgets and put

them together.

Several participants also commented on sharing for the purpose of efficiency. Susanne

shares:

You know what I love that we're doing? I love that we're talking. I love that

we're sharing. I love that we're talking about 'How do we do what we need to do

with less resources? How do we build the efficiencies? How do we talk about

different practices?' And I love how we're all so willing to try different ways of

doing something.

Amanda shares:

[For] quality managers, it's the connection of understanding. Like, operationally,

what are the challenges? What are the opportunities? What's it really like boots on

the ground? And then connecting that to you know, the higher level – the

frameworks piece…. There's so much benefit to sharing. Just [to] understand

what other colleges [are] doing because we can all benefit from building on each

other's experiences.

Mike expresses some frustration with a perceived lack of efficiency as each institution

develops and improves their own processes. He offers:

There's a [program review] system here that's working. Can we share that system

instead of 'Well, I'm going to create my own [process]'?... Like, the time and the

money that is spent on this stuff is just ridiculous. I think we need to collaborate

more.

Participants describe the current mechanisms for sharing, as well as what they

would like to see in the future. Gina speaks to the benefit of the Curriculum Developers

Affinity Group (CDAG) (Curriculum Developers Affinity Group, n.d.) as a vehicle for

collaboration. She shares:

That's what I love about CDAG, because we have those moments to share…. I

find over time [leading program review] has gotten easier. I hope everybody else

is sort of feeling that as well. As we keep refining our templates and sharing with

CDAG and hearing some new ideas. I know for me it's gotten much, much easier

over time.

Other participants expressed a desire for additional structures and mechanisms to support

quality manager collaboration. Kate offers:

I would say right now the only opportunity I really get for [structured

collaboration] is, to go join a [system] working group because they're open to

[any] employee category. Those are really valuable. But they are very specific and

there are more things that we want to talk about.

Rochelle agrees. She sees the value of Heads of Quality Management (Ontario College

Quality Assurance Service, 2017), a provincial group for Deans and Directors who

oversee quality but suggests that a similar group is also needed for quality managers:

Heads of Quality Management is great for the leaders. But that doesn't give a

voice to like the managers like you and I, who are on the ground implementing

these procedures and actually in the dirt trying to help the program teams through

a process that they don't see the value in. And that [quality manager] voice is

never [heard]… while the Directors know and see [what quality managers are

doing], they're still trying to think policy-wise, like the higher-level thinking. So

we need to find a way to bring those [operational and higher-level] pieces

together…. So, I see the need for improved collaboration across the doers, like our

level. We need to have a voice. We need to have a table that we come to, that we

discuss, and we ideate, and we share.

Susanne, Tammy, and Amanda all express a similar desire. Susanne shares that she would

"love to be part of a group where we could deconstruct and create and get excited about

these different things because our jobs – well, I find our jobs are very unique." Tammy

offers, "There would be value in [quality managers] coming together with colleagues and

just having more professional development…. Having some kind of substructure or

something like [a] sub-committee list serv would be so valuable." Amanda agrees. She

offers:

[There are] emerging leaders in our space that really are advocates of [the quality

review] process. And so how do we build that community of practice to help the

piece around socializing the process and understanding what is academic quality

[and] what does that look like?

Looking ahead to the future, Gina reflects on how increased collaboration might impact the system over time. "I think we're going to start seeing [program review become] a little more similar as we build together." Susanne agrees. "I think that we need to continue to [talk and share]. I think that we need to build quality assurance resources to support what's happening provincially." Relatedly, Mike expresses a strong desire for more similarities in how the colleges approach program review. He shares:

> If I was told as a sector this is how all the colleges are going to conduct their [program] reviews, I'm going to look at it and go 'Thank God. Someone finally took leadership and is telling us what's required.'

This leads to a pattern in the responses related to quality managers seeking to influence the provincial quality system.

4.4.2   Influencing the Provincial Quality System

Quality managers orient their work not only in the broader context of their institutions but also in the provincial system itself. Participants reflected on the maturity of the Ontario college system and expressed a desire for provincial structures and processes to recognize that maturity. There was a pattern in the responses related to influencing the future of quality assurance at the system level and playing an active role in its improvement and evolution.

Participants reflected on the evolution of quality assurance at the colleges over the past 10 years. Tammy shares, "Quality assurance has been part of the college lifecycle for

almost 10 years or so. I think colleges are doing a great job offering quality education to students." Kate adds:

> Most of us can agree that 10 years ago quality assurance didn't look [the way it does today]. Certainly, it didn't at [my college] …. I just think, provided we still have some creativity and good strategy at the top, it can only it can only get better.

Amanda similar reflects on the maturity of the system and how it has impacted quality processes and interactions with provincial bodies:

> And as we have matured as a system, looking at our own processes, working with [provincial quality bodies] has been interesting in the way that we've felt definitely a shift in their approach to recognize our maturity, and being able to provide us with the trust that we're doing what we need to do.

> In the same way that quality managers seek to make program review meaningful for program stakeholders, participants expressed a desire for provincial quality assurance processes to be more meaningful for the colleges. Amanda expresses a desire for provincial bodies to "develop processes, tools, approaches that [are] really not this one-size-fits-all but really meeting us where we're at and doing it in a way that is meaningful for all colleges." Amanda reflects on a recent initiative related to improving the provincial audit. She shares:

> But with recently this piece around 'What does CQAAP look like for colleges?', I think it's a really interesting narrative to say, 'Okay, is there an opportunity here

to understand how [external quality bodies] can sort of better support, or how we

can have more value or benefit in in engaging in this process?

Susanne references the same initiative:

We [are] comfortable with the audit process right now. And all of a sudden now

it's going to change, and they're thinking that it's going to be easier [for the

colleges]. So I find that really interesting, a little nerve racking, and exciting at the

same time. Because I don't see it being easier. But I'm willing to be open minded.

Rochelle also reflects on the provincial audit. She suggests:

Having a systems approach to [program review] work … would then remove the

need to have an audit that is so cumbersome on the system…. I think we need to

move away from these massive [audit] reports. I see [the audit being] more as an

assessment of what policies and what practices do you have in place, and then

what evidence you have to support it versus a narrative we have to rewrite every

five or six years. It's a huge investment of time…. I feel like [standard operating

procedures] would make more sense. You've got your job description. You've got

your standard operating procedures, in terms of your process or your process

guidelines. And then you've got evidence that the processes are being followed

versus [producing] this massive [audit report].

Amanda offers her perspective on how to make provincial quality assurance more

meaningful, which connects to another pattern discussed at the program-level –

compliance versus improvement. She shares:

I'm hoping to see, as the years go on and we continue to work with our external

bodies, that academic quality is less sort of like this formal, compliant approach to

quality, and really looking at in what ways [does quality assurance help us] to

achieve our goals?... So I think, when looking at the future of quality … within in

our own province, it's very much [about] recognizing the maturity and having

trust in the system and what we've developed, and being able to develop

[external] processes, tools, approaches that [are] really not this one size fits all but

really meeting us where we're at and doing it in a way that is meaningful for all

colleges.

To achieve this future state, participants expressed a desire to inform system

changes more directly. Amanda shares that she wants to "inform, provincially, these

various frameworks that we have coming through [external quality assurance bodies]."

Gina suggests that "there [could] be a committee of [representatives from] across

different colleges to come up with the quintessential – maybe not quintessential [program

review] template – but quintessential [program review] outcomes." Kate expresses a

desire to contribute to a future that is more agile and creative: "I think [provincial quality

assurance] can only be more nimble. And I do think there's room to sort of just be a little

bit creative. Now is the time I feel like we need to start breaking some rules." Kate goes

on to explain how she believes the core mandate of the colleges, which is to prepare

students for employment and meet local labour market needs (Ontario Ministry of

Colleges and Universities, n.d.-b, para. 3), can act as a litmus test to help challenge

existing rules. She shares:

> We can't just pretend that there aren't exceptions to the rules. Let's do the logic
>
> for every single kind of rule we have and see, 'What is it we really need to be
>
> doing? What helps students? What gets them into the workplace? What helps
>
> support workplaces and give them the grads and the employees that they need?'

Mike similarly expresses a desire to challenge the current system and calls for quality

managers to take on a more active role in this regard:

> I think [quality managers] need to be pushing back when these models come
>
> down. We need to have all the voices at the table to come together…. Curriculum
>
> conversations are not easy. They have to be battled. You have to stand for – take a
>
> stand and defend your position. We need to have those really, really difficult
>
> conversations at a sector level that involves everybody, and has all voices
>
> represented.

4.4.3 Theme Summary

Quality managers may not all agree on what the future holds for quality assurance

in the Ontario college system, but they all want to have a hand in shaping it and they want

to do it together. Gina offers, "I think we are on the right track, and I think the more that

we meet, share, review, [and] exchange information, the better it's going to be." In

addition to new structures that enable greater collaboration and system influence, Amanda

and Tammy suggest that more resources are also needed at the provincial level. Tammy calls for additional training resources. She notes:

> I would love more training support. I am a go-getter in terms of like, I'm resourceful. So I can try to find what I need to learn. However, there's [a lot] that you don't know…. There's so much opportunity for training for new [quality managers].

Amanda similarly suggests there is a need for more resources, including research. She shares:

> When you go on [the] websites [of post-secondary quality assurance bodies in other jurisdictions] there is a ton of research around good practices and also some focus on what is happening currently within their own system and [the] impacts of quality assurance processes [on provincial and national initiatives]. I would love to see OCQAS [provide more information about] degrees in the college space. 'What are we doing as a system? And how is that impacting our ability to be able to support these initiatives within our own colleges?'… [Research] is wholeheartedly where I think we need to just go as a system, to really get some actual insight and some deeper understanding around our structures.

Susanne offers her perspective on the future of quality assurance, through the lens of her experience with other quality managers. She shares:

> The [quality managers] that I have met, we all have this personality and this drive like 'Oh, you know, this is exciting. We can make a better environment for

students, for the people we work with, [and] create stronger students for

employers,' So I think [the future is] really, really exciting. I think we are coming

together.

This observation about the characteristics of quality managers leads to a discussion of

how the four themes relate to each other and the common traits of quality managers that

emerged in the responses of the participants.

4.5   Connecting the Themes

Some of the codes identified in the analysis were not specific to one particular

theme; rather, they spanned all four themes. Referring back to Figure 5. Mind Map

Iteration 3 – Final Themes, the codes related to influence and the traits of quality

managers are shown as spanning all four themes. The language used by quality managers

to describe themselves, their approaches to this work, and their passion for quality reveals

some similarities in the type of people who take on the role of a quality manager. There

were patterns in the responses related to having an improvement mindset, leading with

empathy, and a passion for quality.

Participants described how they approach their work with an improvement

mindset. Rochelle, Tammy, and Gina express this in terms of program review process

improvements. Rochelle reflects, "But I think in the same way that our programs are

constantly needing to be reflecting 'What can we do better?' that's how I approached our

process. 'How can we do this better?'" Tammy echoes these sentiments as follows: "How

we can create processes and mechanisms in a sense of creating efficiencies, but [also]

being able to continuously check in on the processes that we have to just make it kind of easier." Gina similarly reflects that "there's always a million things you can do to make [the process] better." Whereas Susanne and Glenna reflect on how their work leads to program improvement. Susanne shares, "I've always really enjoyed the idea of working on programs and program improvement and working with people to get excited about opportunities for students." Glenna expresses similar sentiments with: "You know, [I lead this work] through the force of my personality and my belief in continuous improvement… [I tell faculty] this is what this journey is. It's continuous improvement."

Empathy was another common thread in the participants' responses. Rochelle shares how she tries to reflect on her work from the perspective of different stakeholders:

I've always tried to put myself in the seat of the program administrator. And then, as I've [made process changes] people have given me feedback. 'Oh would be nice if had this', and then I would produce whatever resource they asked for. I've added some resources and supports thinking about 'Well, if I was faculty what would I want, what would be helpful to me?' For the [program administrators] I did the same thing. We've implemented reports so they can see on an as-needed basis where the program teams are in the process.

Susanne describes how she is careful with the language she uses. She shares, "We do a scan, but we don't call it a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) as 'weakness' sounded so harsh for people who are so invested in [making] changes to [address] challenges." Several participants spoke about meeting programs and people

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where they are at. Amanda shares, "We have to meet programs and individuals where they're at, and that will look different across faculties and programs." Susanne shares, "I'm never judgmental. Because I always think everyone's in a different place, and it's just so interesting to start in all these different places." Glenna shares that when she works with programs, she's "meeting them where they're at and trying to get everyone sort of on the same page." She also reflects specifically on how she acknowledges the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on faculty. Glenna notes:

> They're burnt out from the pandemic where they had to work nights and weekends to get people through practicums and just like, on and on. It's frustration that they're not being listened to or heard. So I try to explain it. This is the process for being listened to.

Rochelle displays similar empathy for program administrators:

> Program administrators that are so swamped that they don't have opportunity to provide the assistance, the support that we need as a partnership [in the program review process] …. My goal is to make program administrators successful, and their success is my success when it comes to these processes."

She goes on the acknowledge that "everybody is going in with the best of intentions, trying to put their best foot forward, trying to do their best work. Prioritizing in the best way that they know how."

The final pattern that emerged in the responses of the participants was a passion for quality and the impacts it has on post-secondary education. Amanda shares, "[When I

moved into a role] where I was really embedded in the quality assurance process … that's really where some of my passion, really a passion around academic quality, started to really develop as I was further understanding or had an opportunity to understand the impacts of [quality]." Susanne reflects on the energy she puts into her work. She shares, "Some days I go home and I'm like 'I have nothing left. I gave it all the way.' But I just think it's so important. I think you have to really believe in quality practices and get excited about them."

Several participants described how they feel about their roles and the work they lead. "Love" was a commonly used verb. Kate shares:

The other thing that I love about [this work] is that I'm working across all employee categories across all areas of the college. ... Again, it's that whole big picture thing to see how the sector really works, and all of the parts that make it make it up.

Vicki shares, "The experience [of leading program review] is – it's fulfilling. It's rewarding." Susanne shares, "I really enjoy this. I really enjoy this work." Tammy shares, "Yeah, it's a lot. But I love it." And finally, Glenna shares, "I love this role. I love what I do…. It's always different. And I just, I love all of it."

Chapter 5: Discussion

As previously stated, phenomenology can be described as a philosophy rather than a scientific research method (Norlyk & Harder, 2010) which encompasses a range of research approaches (Finlay, 2012). It "starts with the researcher who has a curiosity or a passion that is turned into a research question" (Finlay, 2012, p. 175). The purpose of the phenomenological approach is to identify phenomena through how they are perceived by the actors in a situation, with emphasis on the importance of personal perspective and interpretation (Lester, 1999). Through this study the researcher, herself a quality manager at an Ontario college, sought to examine quality assurance in post-secondary education through the perspectives and experiences of her peers. As the researcher has a degree of closeness to the population being examined through a lived familiarity, this positions the study as insider research (Mercer, 2007; Taylor, 2011).

As the quality manager role is underrepresented in the literature on quality assurance in post-secondary education, as are the roles of colleges and the province of Ontario, this study sought to contribute new perspectives to the existing body of knowledge on this topic. Additionally, this study sought to explore the concept of quality managers as quality intermediaries who must consider all the forces that impact quality assurance and then develop and lead quality assurance processes that balance and harmonize these forces. Furthermore, this study included an analysis of the content of quality assurance documents, building on research related to how the tone and language

used in quality assurance documentation can serve to either alienate or engage faculty members (Bowker, 2016).

5.1   Key Findings

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do quality managers perceive quality in post-secondary education?

2. What are the experiences of quality managers in leading comprehensive program review?

3. How do quality managers perceive the effectiveness of comprehensive program review at their institution?

4. How do quality managers perceive their ability to influence quality at their institution?

5. How do quality managers describe the future of quality in post-secondary education?

The results of this study paint a vivid picture of the experiences of quality managers and illustrate how they perceive the primary purpose of quality assurance in post-secondary education to be improvement focused. Quality managers acknowledge that there are also elements related to compliance and that this duality does lead to tension and resistance. This connects directly to the first research question related to how quality managers perceive quality. They take a supportive and non-judgmental approach to program review and emphasize the goal of improvement.

As Theme 1: *Quality Managers Frame and Enable Program Quality* illustrates, quality managers take a very action-oriented approach and work continuously to improve processes and build relationships to secure buy-in and ensure the program review process is effective. Additionally, a common thread that emerged in the results was the concept that quality assurance is not a "one-size-fits-all" process. Quality managers are not only trying to make the program review process more effective; they are trying to make it more meaningful by meeting programs and people where they are at and tailoring the process to meet their individual needs. These results connect directly to the third research question related to process effectiveness.

However, the results indicate that quality managers do not assess the effectiveness of program reviews solely on the basis of whether or not the process is completed and whether or not stakeholders find it to be meaningful. As Theme 2: *Quality Managers Drive Program Change* illustrates, quality managers want their work to have an impact on the students and the industry stakeholders that the Ontario college system serves. Therefore, in many cases they are extending their processes, oversight, and influence through to the program change process. This legitimizes the program review process and makes is impactful by ensuring changes are realized. This addresses a key source of faculty resistance – that program review does not lead to change. This expansion of the sphere of influence of quality managers beyond program review is notable and connects directly to the fourth research question related to their perceived ability to influence at their institution.

The results also illustrate that quality managers are seeking to exert influence not only at the program level but also across their institutions. They want to leverage their unique cross-institutional experiences and perspectives to influence institutional strategies, priorities, and resource planning. This desire again relates back to the common thread of quality managers wanting to have positive impacts on their institutions and its stakeholders. As Theme 3: *Quality Managers Cultivate a Culture of Quality* illustrates, they want to influence a culture where quality becomes pervasive; rather than being seen as a single activity or process, quality is understood by everyone as a broader concept that is embedded in everything. To realize this culture shift, quality managers try to connect institutional processes and surface data and information to inform and support strategic planning and decision-making, with varying degrees of success. The results indicate that as quality managers seek to influence beyond the program level, their degree of influence decreases.

Nonetheless, quality managers desire to exert their influence at the highest level. They want to bring their "boots on the ground" operational perspectives to provincial working groups and external quality assurance agencies to help inform system structures and processes. As Theme 4: *Quality Managers Seek System Change* illustrates, quality managers are already reaching out informally and supporting each other. Rather than "reinventing the wheel", they see the value in sharing and collaborating to learn from each other and make their work easier. Now, they see an opportunity to come together and influence as a collective in order to realize the same improvements at a system level

that they have implemented at a program level. This connects directly to the fifth research question related to how quality managers perceive the future of quality in post-secondary education. Quality managers describe the future of quality as needing to continue to be less about compliance and more about meaningful improvement at every level. The provincial system might need to make major changes to catch up with the work that Quality Managers have been leading. Quality managers want provincial quality audits to be less cumbersome and less of a "check box" exercise; rather, the audit should meet the colleges where they are at and should be a vehicle to meaningfully reflect and identify opportunities for improvement.

 Figure 6 illustrates the relationship between the four themes in terms of the actions, level of impact, and degree of influence of quality managers.
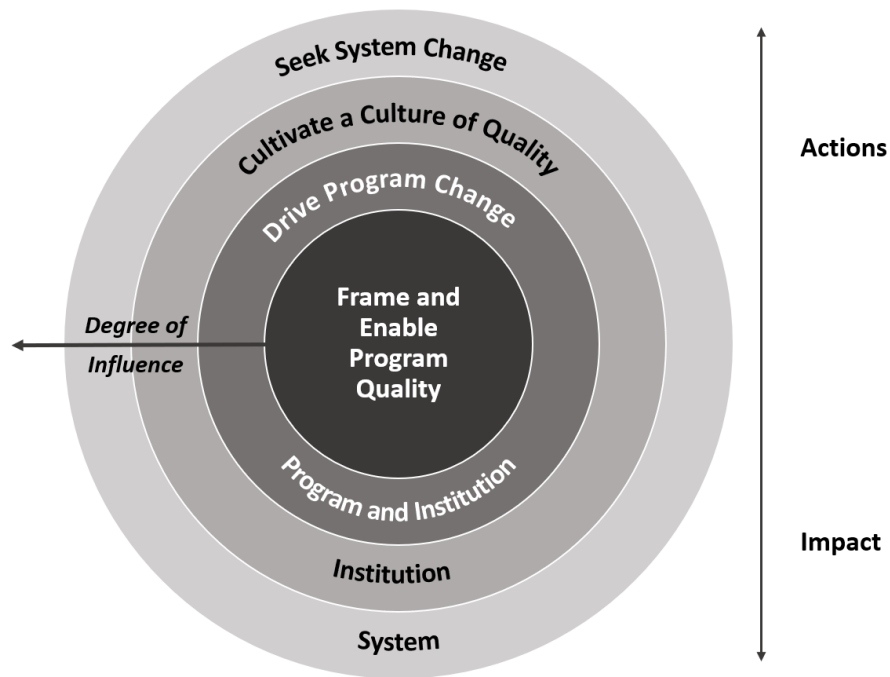
Circular diagram with nested rings. Outer labels clockwise from top: "Seek System Change", "Cultivate a Culture of Quality", "Drive Program Change". Center: "Frame and Enable Program Quality". Lower ring labels: "Program and Institution", "Institution", "System". Left arrow labeled "Degree of Influence". Right side vertical arrow labeled "Actions" at top and "Impact" at bottom.

Figure 6. The Actions, Impact, and Degree of Influence of Quality Managers

As this model illustrates, quality managers exert the strongest degree of influence and have the most impact at the program level by framing and enabling program review. As they strive to have greater impacts at the institutional and system levels, their degree of influence lessens. Nevertheless, quality managers are taking actions, individually and collectively, to extend their influence. To ensure that program review isn't just a paper exercise and that it leads to meaningful change, quality managers are trying to drive program change processes at both the program and the institutional level. Additionally, quality managers are trying to cultivate a culture of quality at their institutions by elevating the concept of quality, connecting processes, and influencing strategic decision-making. Finally, quality managers are seeking to influence system change through more

active participation, in the hopes of leveraging their experiences to help shift provincial quality activities from compliance-focused to improvement-driven.

The degree of influence observed in the results also relates to the concept of quality managers acting as quality intermediaries. As shown in Figure 7, the results illustrate that rather than a passive, unidirectional relationship where internal and external forces are exerting influence on quality managers, there is a bidirectional relationship of influence. Quality managers are exerting influence in order to drive program change, cultivate a culture of quality, and seek system change.

Figure 7. Bidirectional Influence of Internal and External Forces and Quality Managers in Quality Assurance in Post-secondary Education

Table 1 summarizes the key findings of this study. It presents the four themes, the actions quality managers are taking, the level of impact, their desired outcomes, and their degree of influence.

Table 1. Quality Manager Actions, Impact, Desired Outcome, and Influence

THEME	ACTIONS	IMPACT	DESIRED OUTCOME	INFLUENCE
Frame and Enable Program Quality	Framing the Purpose and Goals of Quality Assurance Leading and Improving Program Review Processes Building Relationships with Stakeholders	Program	***Review Process is Effective*** Stakeholders buy-in to the process Process is completed and is meaningful	Significant
Drive Program Change	"Marrying" Program Review and Program Change Supporting Program Change	Program and Institution	***Review Process is Legitimate*** Change is planned for, supported and realized Process is impactful	Moderate
Cultivate a Culture of Quality	Connecting Annual and Cyclical Program Review Influencing Institutional Activities and Priorities "Transmitting" a Culture of Quality	Institution	***Quality is Pervasive*** Quality exists beyond review Review outcomes inform institutional priorities Processes are interconnected	Developing
Seek System Change	Helping and Supporting Each Other Influencing the Provincial Quality System	System	***Provincial Quality System is Improvement-focused*** Continuous process improvement at the system level Audit process is meaningful	Desired

Furthermore, the results of this study illustrate that in most cases the content and language of quality assurance documents does not closely align with the way quality managers verbally describe quality and quality assurance processes. The documents were very instructional in nature, focusing on the mechanics of the program review process as opposed to its purpose and its value for program stakeholders. The documents also did not include any information regarding how the process can be tailored to meet the needs of individual programs, which is a key strategy that quality managers are employing to mitigate resistance and make the program review process more meaningful. Additionally, information directly connecting program review with program change was also mostly absent, which is another key strategy quality managers are employing to legitimize the program review process and ensure that it has a positive impact on faculty, students, and industry. These are missed opportunities to use quality assurance documents to help "change the narrative" regarding program reviews.

Moving from the program level to the institutional level, an analysis of quality assurance documents found that most do not describe how program review supports, connects to, or influences institutional processes or priorities. In fact, only one document had references to how program review contributes to an institutional culture. Again, this presents a missed opportunity for the documentation to support the increased level of influence that quality managers seek to have at the institutional level and to position program review in the broader context of a culture of quality.

5.2   Implications

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge related to quality assurance in post-secondary education by focusing on the perspectives and experiences of a critical yet underrepresented group – quality managers. The results of this study align with and build upon the limited research literature related to the perceptions and experiences of quality managers. Themes 1 and 2 align closely with Goff's (2016) level three approach to quality assurance where quality managers employ strategies of engaged support with focus on reflection and enhancement for the purpose of improvement. Additionally, the results related to how quality managers perceive their authority and their ability to influence align with previous research which suggests that quality managers do not see themselves as leaders with positional authority; rather they use their personal qualities and expert knowledge to exert influence (Osseo-Asare et al., 2005).

The results of this study also help to further illustrate how quality managers deal with resistance to quality assurance processes. Reith and Seyfried (2019) suggest that quality managers employ different strategies when encountering resistance, such as negotiation (references to internal requirements), legitimation (references to external requirements), and promotion (references to benefits and outcomes). Themes 1 and 2 show that quality managers are most often using promotion as a strategy to secure buy-in for program review by focusing on the benefits and the impact of the process. Furthermore, at the tactical level, the results illustrate that quality managers are employing all of the tactics suggested by Reith and Seyfried to combat resistance,

including balancing (harmonizing external requirements and internal demands), pacifying (making the requirement easier to achieve), and bargaining (offering more information and assistance). In particular, quality managers are trying to meet programs where they are at, which is a version of pacifying, and are constantly adding more resources and supports to make the process less onerous and easier to complete.

Returning to the different definitions of quality that are present in the literature, the results of this study align with Harvey and Green's (1993) definition of quality as *Fitness for Purpose*: Doing the job it was designed for; meeting the needs of the customer and/or organization. Quality managers describe the purpose of program review as continuous improvement to meet student and industry needs. Two of the classifications of quality proposed by Schindler et al. (2015) also align with the results of this study. Quality as *Purposeful*: Institutional products and services conform to a stated mission/vision or a set of specifications, requirements, or standards, aligns with the compliance-related elements and requirements for program review. However, the results illustrate that quality managers prefer to downplay these requirements and emphasize quality as *Transformative*: Institutional products and services effect positive change in student learning and personal and professional potential. This is illustrated by the expanded focus and influence of quality managers through to program change.

The presence of these two classifications in the results points to the concept of the accountability – improvement tension (Elassy, 2015; Genis, 2002; Hodson & Thomas, 2003; Liu, 2020; Stensaker, 2019), which is pervasive in the literature. In particular, the

results of this study align with Genis' (2002) concept of accountability and improvement as a continuum and the notion that as systems mature, institutions seek a greater balance between compliance with EQA standards and institutional initiatives to manage the quality of learning programs, driven by their own interests and the interests of their stakeholders. The results of the study also highlight the maturity of the Ontario College system and illustrate the shift towards improvement that such maturity naturally compels. The results also demonstrate that quality managers are emphasizing improvement as a strategy to secure faculty buy-in, which aligns with research by Kleijnen et al. (2011) and Cardoso et al. (2013) related to preferences for improvement-focused processes that lead to tangible benefits for students (Elassy, 2015; Kleijnen et al., 2011; Tavares et al., 2017).

Tavares et al. (2017) note that even when processes were improvement-focused, participants did not perceive that quality assurance processes led to actual improvements or innovation. Mello Silva and Vargas (2022) further suggest that the likelihood of innovative outcomes is directly related to how quality assurance processes are managed at the institutional level. The results of this study align with this research in terms of the autonomy quality managers have in terms of positioning quality and overseeing the program review process, the expansion of support and influence through to program change, as well as the emerging connections between the program review process and strategic priorities and innovation.

The results of this study also align with the literature related to quality culture, specifically in the way quality managers describe the importance of communication,

engagement, and trust (Bendermacher et al., 2016; Dzimińska et al., 2018; Elhers, 2009; Loukkola & Zhang, 2010). These elements are present in all quality culture frameworks in the literature; for example, in Ehlers' quality culture framework, these are noted as transversal elements which turn quality culture potential into culturally rooted quality realities. Both Ehlers (2009) and Bendermacher et al. (2016) also suggest that quality culture requires both structural elements, such as systems and processes, as well as enabling elements that support individuals and groups in gaining new knowledge and taking new or different actions. The results of this study suggest that quality managers themselves are the enabling force that bridges quality assurance processes and the positive outcomes which support a quality culture.

Most significantly, the results of this study support and build on the concept of quality work (Elken & Stensaker, 2018). They suggest that quality work emphasizes the interrelated practices of quality development, maintenance, and enhancement, with attention on the agency and actions of the specific actors who lead quality assurance.

Elken and Stensaker (2018) identify five characteristics of quality work:

1. *Rationale*: Balancing accountability and improvement

2. *Notion of quality*: Negotiated and dynamic notions of quality

3. *Actors' roles*: Problem solvers and innovators

4. *Underlying logic*: Rooted in pragmatism

5. *Power and authority*: Individuals having autonomy related to practice

All five of these characteristics are illustrated in the results of this study. Quality managers describe how they balance accountability and improvement, with increasing emphasis on improvement. They describe how they negotiate quality concepts with stakeholders, endeavoring the "change the narrative". They also describe themselves as problem-solvers and demonstrate a strong commitment to continuous improvement. Quality managers discuss how they take a pragmatic approach to this work; they are highly practical and process focused. And finally, quality managers describe the significant autonomy they have in leading this work; which they exercise in collaboration with, and for the benefit of, their stakeholders.

Elken and Stensaker (2018) also suggest that the specific behaviours of actors leading quality work are a result of the combination of institutional norms and the actors' own idiosyncratic preferences. The results of this study illustrate that while there are significant commonalities in how quality managers are approaching their work at a macro level across all four themes, the tactics that they are employing at a micro level are based on what they as individuals think will work best to achieve their desired outcomes within the context of their institutional structures, processes, systems, and politics. This implies that careful consideration should be given to the personality traits when hiring quality managers, which aligns with Seyfried's (2019) contention that the selection of staff may have serious implications in the implementation of quality management.

Lastly, the results suggest that while some quality managers are using more collegial and improvement-focused language to build trust with stakeholders and to help

establish a feeling of reciprocity (Bowker, 2016), there remains a significant opportunity for quality managers to more intentionally leverage program review documents as a tool for framing the process as collaborative, tailored to the needs of programs, improvement focused, and directly connected to program change supports and resources. Quality managers should reflect on whether the tone and language of these documents is supporting or inhibiting their efforts to positively influencing stakeholder perceptions of quality assurance processes.

5.3   Conclusion

By giving voice to the perceptions and experiences of quality managers, the primary actors who lead and oversee quality assurance work at an operational level, this study helps to illuminate the delicate and complex role they play as quality intermediaries. They not only consider and harmonize all of the different forces that exert influence on quality assurance in post-secondary education, but they also exert their own influence in order to have a positive impact on these forces. This bidirectional relationship puts quality managers in a unique position within their institutions; with limited positional authority, they rely heavily on their knowledge and personal qualities to exert influence and achieve their desired outcomes.

As quality intermediaries, quality managers play a lead role in framing and enabling program quality to ensure quality assurance processes are completed and are perceived as meaningful by stakeholders. The results illustrate that both quality managers and stakeholders equate meaning with impact; therefore, quality managers are turning

their attention to program change processes, overseeing and influencing processes to ensure that the improvements identified during program review are actually realized. The tone and language of quality assurance documents could be more aligned with how they verbally present quality as a concept and thus better support their efforts to change stakeholder perceptions and secure buy-in for quality assurance processes.

Moving beyond the program level, this study also illustrates how quality managers are beginning to exert their influence upwards and across their institutions. They are directly and indirectly connecting program review with other institutional processes and initiatives in order to shift the concept of quality from a point-in-time process to an institutional mindset, thereby cultivating a culture of quality. The results also illuminate a desire amongst quality managers to work even more closely together to collectively influence quality at the provincial level. They seek to influence EQA agencies and processes in order to bring the system further along the accountability – improvement continuum (Genis, 2002), to mirror the shifts they have influenced at program and institutional levels.

5.4   Limitations

The design of this study does pose some limitations. While the participant recruitment strategy sought to ensure a representative sample of quality managers in terms of geography and institution size, the participants who accepted the recruitment invitation might possess similar attitudes or perspectives. It is possible that some of the potential participants who did not respond or who declined to participate would have

presented alternate viewpoints or shared distinctly different experiences. The fact that the researcher was an insider may have also dissuaded some potential participants.

The insider nature of this study also poses a limitation related to anonymity. The choice to preserve participant anonymity as much as possible meant that the study omitted all information related to participant characteristics, such as gender, race, age, and professional background. Therefore, no analysis could be completed regarding how these factors influence the experiences and perspectives of quality managers.

5.5 Recommendations

While the results of this study are not necessarily generalizable due to the limited sample size, phenomenological research can be used as the basis for practical theory and to inform, support or challenge policy and action (Lester, 1999). The results point to several considerations for quality managers, institutional leaders, and quality assurance systems. The results suggest a need for quality managers to reflect on the scope and limits of their roles and consider if there is a need or an opportunity to expand their work and influence. The results also suggest that quality managers within systems or jurisdictions might consider self-organizing into a working group in order to benefit from each other's experiences and thereby realize improvements in processes, stakeholder buy-in, and achieving a quality culture more quickly.

The results also suggest a need for institutional leaders to review the job descriptions and hiring practices for quality managers to ensure these positions are occupied by individuals who have an improvement mindset and the ability to build

relationships and influence at all levels. Additionally, institutional leaders should identify

ways to leverage the experiences and unique perspectives of quality managers for the

benefit of their institutions. This could mean adding quality managers to strategic

committees and/or working groups for institutional initiatives. Furthermore, the results

point to an opportunity for quality systems to create more informal and formal

opportunities to work with quality managers, thereby ensuring that their operational

insights can inform system improvements.

The results of this study also suggest areas for further research. Additional

phenomenological studies with quality managers in other jurisdictions that have a similar

level of system maturity are suggested to see if comparable findings emerge. A similar

study conducted by an "outsider" is also recommended to see how greater researcher

objectivity impacts data collection and analysis. Where possible, quality manager studies

with larger sample sizes and/or that span different systems and jurisdictions are also

recommended to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, further research on quality assurance processes and documentation

is recommended. The focus of this study was to understand and analyze the experiences

of quality managers rather than the quality assurance processes. Further research at the

process level would add to the existing literature on quality work (Elken & Stensaker,

2018) and the impacts of quality assurance language (Bowker, 2016). Elken and

Stensaker note that "quality work directs attention to the practicalities of enhancing

quality in increasingly complex institutional settings" (p. 11). As post-secondary

institutions in all jurisdictions contend with challenges and risks related to internationalization, changing student demographics, the skilled trades gap, a more competitive market, and disruptive technology (Rutka, 2022), quality managers will need to continue to position quality assurance processes as improvement-focused, outcome-based, and aligned with institutional strategies.

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Appendix A – Recruitment Letter

Dear [name],

My name is [support staff] at Algonquin College and I am writing to you on behalf of Laura Jarrell. Ms. Jarrell is completing a thesis research study and would like to request your participation. Please review Ms. Jarrell's message below.

Message from Laura Jarrell, Principal Investigator:

I am a Masters student at Memorial University, completing a Master of Education in Post-secondary Studies. My full-time employment position is Chair, Program Quality and Renewal at Algonquin College in Ottawa, Ontario.

I am contacting you to request your participation in a thesis research study that I am conducting titled: Perceptions of Quality Managers at Ontario colleges. My intention is to better understand quality assurance work at Ontario colleges by exploring the perceptions and experiences of eight quality managers. Ontario is underrepresented in quality assurance research, as are college and polytechnics. I hope the results of the study will benefit both the Ontario and Canadian post-secondary education sectors. A better understanding of the role of quality managers can support quality assurance strategy development, policy-making, internal quality assurance process improvement, and external quality assurance agency collaboration.

The study involves: 1) sharing one quality assurance document that you have authored to provide context for your approach to quality assurance (sent by email); and 2) participating in a 60-minute semi-structured interview via Zoom web-conferencing platform (participants must consent to the sessions being video recorded); and 3) validating the interview transcript and summary. The total time commitment is estimated to be up to three hours.

Participation is completely voluntary. I acknowledge that we may have previously been in contact, directly or indirectly, due to the nature of my role at Algonquin College. You should not feel any obligation to participate in this study based on those interactions and choosing to not participate will not have any negative impact or bearing on future professional or personal interactions.

All data collected will be confidential, securely stored, and only used for the purposes of this research. Pseudonyms will be used for both individuals and institutions when reporting all findings. Care will be taken to ensure the removal of any personally identifiable information. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

The proposal for this research has been approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) at Memorial University. If you have ethical concerns about the research (such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant), you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

If you would like to participate in the study please read the attached Informed Consent Form and confirm consent by replying to this email.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,
[support staff], on behalf of
Laura Jarrell
Masters student, Memorial University

Appendix B – Informed Consent

Title: Perceptions of Quality Managers at Ontario Colleges

Researcher(s):   Laura Jarrell

                            Student, Master of Education at Memorial University

                            lajarrell@mun.ca

Supervisor(s):   Dr. Dale Kirby

                            Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education at Memorial University

                            dkirby@mun.ca

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled "Perceptions of Quality Managers at Ontario Colleges."

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Laura Jarrell, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:

Hello, my name is Laura Jarrell and I am the Manager, Program Quality and Renewal at Algonquin College in Ottawa, Ontario. As part of my masters program, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Dale Kirby. This research is not being conducted on behalf Algonquin College.

Purpose of Study:

You have been contacted as you lead quality assurance at an Ontario college. The purpose of this study is to better understand quality assurance work at Ontario colleges by exploring the perceptions and experiences of quality managers, defined as the individuals

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who directly oversee quality assurance processes in post-secondary institutions. The quality manager role is underrepresented in the literature, as research often focuses on the perceptions of stakeholders who participate in, rather than lead, quality assurance processes. Ontario is also underrepresented in the literature, as are polytechnics and colleges.

What You Will Do in this Study:

Participation in the study includes sharing one quality assurance document (set of instructions or presentation) that you have prepared with the researcher (sent by email), participating in a 60-minute semi-structured interview via Zoom web-conferencing platform (participants must consent to the sessions being video recorded), and validating the transcript of the interview. The purpose of sharing a quality assurance document is to provide additional context. Participants reserve the right to skip any questions during the interview.

Length of Time:

- 60-minute semi-structured interview via Zoom web-conferencing platform (sessions will be recorded). For more information about Zoom's privacy statement please visit: https://explore.zoom.us/en/privacy/

- After the interview, and before the data is analyzed, the participant will be able to review the transcript of the interview, and to add, change, or delete information. The purpose of this step is to give participants the opportunity to edit or remove information that, upon further reflection, they do not wish to share, as well as the opportunity to add further details. The length of time to review and edit is dependent on the extent of changes requested and is not expected to take more than one hour.

- After the interview has been summarized, the participant will have an opportunity to review and validate the summary. The purpose of this step is to ensure the participant agrees that the spirit of their comments have been captured accurately. This is not expected to take more than one hour.

- The total time commitment is estimated to be up to three hours.

Withdrawal from the Study:

Participants can withdraw from the study at any time. You may withdraw during the interview by indicating that you wish to stop and end / leave the online session. In this case, you will be asked whether any data collected to that point may be retained and used in the study, or if you wish for it to be destroyed. If after your interview you also choose

to withdraw the data you have provided, you may do so up until March 31, 2023. After March 31, 2023, data will have been analyzed, anonymized, and compiled into a database that does not contain information that can be used to identify your participation in the study. To withdraw from the study, please email lajarrell@mun.ca or call 613-853-9572.

Possible Benefits:

This study may benefit you as it provides an opportunity for reflection and sharing personal thoughts and experiences related to your role as a quality manager. Reflecting on these experiences may help inform your future work in quality assurance. Additionally, this study offers you an opportunity to contribute to the current research on quality assurance, from an Ontario college perspective. Information from this research could be of benefit to post-secondary education in Ontario, in Canada, and to the scholarly community.

Possible Risks:

Because you will be reflecting upon past and current experiences related to your role as a quality manager, some of this reflection may trigger unpleasant memories or feelings of discomfort. You may also reveal internal information during your interview that in hindsight you would have preferred to keep confidential. You will have the opportunity to review your interview transcript and delete any content prior to the data being analyzed. You also may access counselling resources via your employee assistance program.

Confidentiality:

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. Your privacy and confidentiality will be maintained. Only the lead researcher, Laura Jarrell, and the research supervisor, Dr. Dale Kirby, will have access to the interview recordings/transcripts and the quality assurance documents.

The data from this research project may be published and presented at conferences; however, your identity will be kept confidential. Although we will report direct quotations from the interviews, you will be given a pseudonym, and all identifying information such as your name, title, institution, city, email address, and phone number will be removed from our report. Because the participants for this research project have been selected from a small group of people, some who are known to each other, it is still possible that you may be identifiable to other people on the basis of your interview responses, quotations, or experiences.

Anonymity:

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance.

Participation and data will not be anonymous; however, the data will be reported without identifiers. Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure you are not identified. Your anonymity pertaining to your participation in the study cannot be guaranteed if you discuss your participation with colleagues at your institution or at other Ontario colleges. Additionally, the responses you provide during the interview will be reported without identifiers in any possible publication that results from this study.

Recording of Data:

Interviews will be conducted via web-conferencing platform. Recording and live transcript functions will be used.

Use, Access, Ownership, and Storage of Data:

Data collected will only be used for the purposes of this study. Data will be stored electronically on a hard drive in encrypted files. Only the lead researcher and supervisor will have access to the data. All personally identifiable information will be removed from the data and replaced with pseudonyms.

Data will be kept for a minimum of five years, as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research.

Reporting of Results:

Data from this research may be published in journal articles, may be part of a report to Heads of Quality Management or the Coordinating Committee of Vice-Presidents, Academic (CCVPA), may be part of a report to ministries within the government of Ontario, or may be part of conference presentations. Upon completion, my thesis will be available at Memorial University's Queen Elizabeth II library, and can be accessed online at: http://collections.mun.ca/cdm/search/collection/theses. Data will be reported with direct quotations (attributed to pseudonyms) as well as in aggregated / summarized form.

Sharing of Results with Participants:

A copy of my thesis will be provided electronically to all participants.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: Laura Jarrell lajarrell@mun.ca and Dr. Dale Kirby dkirby@mun.ca.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

By consenting to participate in this research you agree that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study. Please email lajarrell@mun.ca or call 613-853-9572.
- You are satisfied that any questions you had have been addressed.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that if you choose to end participation during data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be retained by the researcher, unless you indicate otherwise.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw after data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to March 31, 2023. After March 31, 2023 your data will have been anonymized and you cannot withdraw your data after this date.
- You agree to provide one quality assurance document that you have authored.
- You agree and give consent for your interview to be recorded via Zoom web-conferencing platform.
- You agree and give consent for the researcher to use direct quotations from your interview.

By consenting to this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

You may convey consent by responding to the recruitment email confirming that you have read and agree with the information outlined in this form, and to arrange a time to participate.

Appendix C – ICHER Approval Letter

<table>
<tr><td>ICEHR Number:</td><td>20222848-ED</td></tr>
<tr><td>Approval Period:</td><td>May 20, 2022 – May 31, 2023</td></tr>
<tr><td>Funding Source:</td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td>Responsible Faculty:</td><td>Dr. Dale Kirby
Faculty of Education</td></tr>
<tr><td>Title of Project:</td><td>*Perceptions of Quality Managers at Ontario Colleges*</td></tr>
</table>

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR)

St. John's, NL Canada A1C 5S7
Tel: 709 864-2561 icehr@mun.ca
www.mun.ca/research/ethics/humans/icehr

May 20, 2022

Ms. Laura Jarrell
Faculty of Education
Memorial University

Dear Ms. Jarrell:

Thank you for your correspondence addressing the issues raised by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research (ICEHR) for the above-named research project. ICEHR has re-examined the proposal with the clarifications and revisions submitted, and is satisfied that the concerns raised by the Committee have been adequately addressed. In accordance with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2)*, the project has been granted *full ethics clearance* for one year. ICEHR approval applies to the ethical acceptability of the research, as per Article 6.3 of the *TCPS2*. Researchers are responsible for adherence to any other relevant University policies and/or funded or non-funded agreements that may be associated with the project. If funding is obtained subsequent to ethics approval, you must submit a Funding and/or Partner Change Request to ICEHR so that this ethics clearance can be linked to your award.

The *TCPS2* requires that you strictly adhere to the protocol and documents as last reviewed by ICEHR. If you need to make additions and/or modifications, you must submit an Amendment Request with a description of these changes, for the Committee's review of potential ethical concerns, before they may be implemented. Submit a Personnel Change Form to add or remove project team members and/or research staff. Also, to inform ICEHR of any unanticipated occurrences, an Adverse Event Report must be submitted with an indication of how the unexpected event may affect the continuation of the project.

The *TCPS2* requires that you submit an Annual Update to ICEHR before May 31, 2023. If you plan to continue the project, you need to request renewal of your ethics clearance and include a brief summary on the progress of your research. When the project no longer involves contact with human participants, is completed and/or terminated, you are required to provide an annual update with a brief final summary and your file will be closed. All post-approval ICEHR event forms noted above must be submitted by selecting the *Applications: Post-Review* link on your Researcher Portal homepage. We wish you success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

James R. Drover

James Drover, Ph.D.
Vice-Chair, ICEHR

JD/bc

cc: Supervisor – Dr. Dale Kirby, Faculty of Education

Appendix D – Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Are you a faculty member or administrator?

2. How long have you been in your current role?

3. What drew you to working in quality assurance?

4. How would you describe the purpose of quality assurance in post-secondary education?

5. How would you describe the goal of your comprehensive program review process?

6. How would you describe your experience leading comprehensive program review?

    a. Experiences with the process

    b. Experiences with internal stakeholders

    c. Experiences with external stakeholders

7. Thinking back to the goal of comprehensive program review, how would you describe the effectiveness of your process in meeting this goal?

8. What could be done to make this process more effective?

9. How would you describe your ability to influence quality at your institution?

    a. Influencing the process and documentation

    b. Influencing the stakeholders

    c. Influencing the culture

10. Thinking back to the purpose of quality assurance, how would you describe the future of quality assurance in post-secondary education?

11. What changes need to occur to realize this future state?

12. What can Quality managers do to help achieve this future state?