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An Exploratory Case Study of a Quality Assurance Process at an Ontario University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree in Education

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Abstract

Currently, quality assurance is a widespread global practice in higher education. This exploratory case study at one Ontario university uses a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis to interrogate the definition of ‘quality’ as it relates to quality assurance. More specifically, this study hopes to raise an awareness that what constitutes quality is taken for granted in quality assurance practices for universities. From an examination of resource documents and interviews with faculty administrators (n=12), the key findings of this study expose an over-arching neoliberal discursive framing of quality and quality assurance. The marketization of higher education leads to an over-emphasis on procedural compliance and a propensity to quantify educational experiences. There was an incongruence between the current approach to quality assurance and education. This research argues that an economic lens borrowed from the business sector is problematic because it assumes principles used in manufacturing a material product can be applied to something as intangible and transformative as education. This research calls on educational leaders to critically reflect on underlying assumptions to expose the power struggles embedded in our quality assurance discourses in order to better understand how dominant ideology obscures other perspectives. An understanding of how quality can be defined from different perspectives disrupts the assumption that a neoliberal economic lens is the only way to view academic quality. Those engaged in administering quality assurance are urged to challenge dominant neoliberal premises and consider alternatives that apply an ethical lens to higher education.

Keywords: higher education; quality assurance; ethical leadership; post-structuralist discourse analysis; case study

Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family for their love and support. You needed to manage without me while I was away for considerable amounts of time.

To Gary who took over much of the family responsibilities, kept me on track, told me I could do it, and did not let my doubts get the better of me, I am eternally grateful.

To my two amazing daughters, Emily and Abbey, who truly give me light in my life, this is for you as much as it is for me. As you embark on your own future educational endeavours, I want you to see a doctoral thesis is within your reach if you so choose. If it is what you want to pursue one day, I know you can achieve it.

All my love always.

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Many thanks to Dr. Melody Viczko for being my second reader and for her enthusiasm for my topic while enrolled in my final course.

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I also wish to express my appreciation for another colleague of mine, Stephanie Allard, who tirelessly proof read my drafts and provided valuable feedback. Words cannot express my gratitude for all the time and thoughtful consideration she gave. As we both embarked on our own foray into graduate studies, there were stimulating discussions on our research topics. She also provided me with a sounding board as I faced the challenges of meeting the demands of work, family, and school.

I want to thank the participants in my study who came forward and generously offered their time to be interviewed by me. Without their insights, I could not have delved into the meaning of academic quality and quality assurance in higher education.

I also want to acknowledge the baristas at several Starbucks who became friendly and family faces as I came to spend countless hours (and a term's worth of tuition on coffee). Without a home office to call my own, I sought refuge at local coffee shops. Starbucks came to be the place I used to escape my house and immerse myself in my studies.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This reminds of the joke about the two fish and they're swimming in the water. The big fish says to the little fish "How do you like the water?" The little fish says "Water?" That's all the fish knows.

(response from one participant)

This chapter introduces the reader to the research topic by presenting the reasons that germinated this study. The creation of a new quality assurance framework in Ontario, the researcher's own exposure to quality assurance processes at different institutions, and a growing concern evident in the academic literature that neoliberal ideals are obscuring ethical goals in higher education provided the impetus to investigate the notion of quality in the context of quality assurance for higher education. First, the reader is provided with a general overview of the study. The text describes how six guiding principles formed an initial analytical framework to structure the inquiry and how a post-structuralist lens was applied to the examination of what is meant by quality as expressed in quality assurance texts and interviews with faculty administrators. Next, a summary of the significance of the research and how the findings hope to contribute to the existing body of knowledge are provided. Finally, this chapter closes with definitions of terms to offer the reader clarity on key terminology relevant to the research.

General Overview of Study

Research questions. This exploratory case study addresses two questions:

- 1) How do quality assurance texts at one Ontario university describe academic quality? and;

- 2) How is quality understood by key stakeholders, namely university faculty administrators who have responsibilities related to the institutional quality assurance process at the chosen Ontario university?

These research questions are intended to interrogate how academic quality is defined and, in doing so, disrupt the assumption that quality assurance is merely an innocuous, passive, and neutral administrative process. By examining the definition of quality in the discourses pertaining to quality assurance, this research also aims to ignite new ideas for alternative frameworks that may be more able to support the inclusion of social and ethical goals in higher education.

Researcher's background. This study stemmed from previous observations while I was employed in various administrative roles at two separate Ontario universities. Over the last two decades, I have held several mid- to senior-level administrative staff positions within three different faculties. In several of my administrative roles, I observed and participated in quality assurance activities. My first encounter with quality assurance was in 2005 when the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) required every academic department to outline the degree level expectations for each of their programs. This was met with a mix of responses from the faculty administrators who were my colleagues at the time. The Dean, Associate Dean Academic, and program directors dutifully completed a mandatory matrix that included six expectations for undergraduate programs and six similar expectations for graduate programs (Table 1 provides these degree level expectations).

Table 1. *Council of Ontario Universities degree level expectations*

Undergraduate	Graduate
1. Depth and breadth of knowledge	1. Depth and breadth of knowledge
2. Knowledge of methodologies	2. Research and scholarship
3. Application of knowledge	3. Level of application of knowledge
4. Communication skills	4. Level of communication skills
5. Awareness of limits of knowledge	5. Awareness of limits of knowledge
6. Autonomy and professional capacity	6. Autonomy and professional capacity

Faculty administrators may not have realized at the time that this exercise was a precursor to a larger endeavour, a new provincial quality assurance framework. Ontario’s quality assurance framework would introduce more formalized and public-facing cyclical reviews for every baccalaureate and master’s degree program in the province. By 2010, the COU had approved its quality assurance framework and universities began to schedule their departmental reviews as well as externally report on other quality assurance activities, such as program closures, program modifications, and new program approvals.

In 2011, my work also involved preparing responses for a professional accreditation. The texts were reported in templates for each specified learning objective. The instructions specified that departments were to begin each written response with the exact phrasing that mirrored the question posed. The structured back-and-forth discourse was intended to ensure that the answers were clear and complete; however, faculty stated that the accrediting agency exerted unnecessary control over the texts, which added a drudgery to the task. Understandably, faculty found this approach constraining and vexing. Similarly, there was a tension between a

desire to meet the demands of an accrediting body and a sense that the requirements were overly administrative and circumscribed.

Shortly afterwards, I changed institutions and assumed a role at a department that was in the midst of preparing for two professional accreditations and one institutional quality assurance process. I observed yet again faculty administrators were frustrated with the reporting requirements. The leadership in the various departments where I was employed were skeptical whether quality assurance exercises were worthwhile, stated it diverted time and attention away from research and teaching, and saw little effect on the academic programs. Faculty administrators, however, were left with no choice but to complete the work for quality assurance purposes. There was a general attitude that quality assurance was a laborious task for administrators that only arose approximately every six to eight years and then, much to everyone's relief, could be disregarded once the reviews were finalized. The quality assurance processes were viewed as unwanted, burdensome, and only mildly informative.

I began to wonder if my previous experiences were limited to the individuals and the situations where I found myself. Recently, roles similar to mine that are specifically created to shepherd quality assurance processes in a department or division have sprouted across the university landscape. This signals a change in how program areas are approaching quality assurance from a decade ago. In recent times, I have seen a growing number of positions emerge at my institution where a financial commitment is made to increase visibility in complying with quality assurance processes. My interest in researching this topic was sparked by my personal experiences and the observed uncertainty of what defines quality in the context of satisfying quality assurance requirements.

Furthermore, my research connects with my concern that ethical and social goals have become vestiges of the past. The influence of a neoliberal ideology has made an impact on how institutions operate and see themselves (Apple, 2001; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Brown, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Garrett, 2010; Gillies, 2008; Goldberg, 2006; Guta, Nixon, & Wilson, 2013; Romanowski, 2014; Rowlands, 2012). Universities have come to accept framing academic activities in economic terms. The focus on market values placed on higher education has overshadowed other aims and objectives. My research intends to contemplate Ball's (2012) conclusions that under the current neoliberal framework, we have become governable subjects and have replaced moral imperatives with economic goals. As well, my research touches on alternatives, such as Moller's (2009) model for reciprocal accountability that demands schools take responsibility for educating future citizens and regulators who monitor schools do so responsibly with civic goals in mind. Additionally, my research is in response to Langlois and Lapointe's (2014) call for a different form of governance for education that is more authentic in its pursuit of a quality education. This exploratory case study investigates how quality is presently defined. By studying one Ontario university, this research describes the enactment of a quality assurance process and reflects on what the discourses can reveal in terms of ideological influences. My research seeks alternative frameworks that may steer quality assurance towards more socially minded efforts.

Purpose. My exploratory case study interrogates how quality is defined and operationalized in Ontario at one university. The multiple presupposed understandings of quality are the primary subjects of this inquiry. Niesche and Gowlett (2015) discuss that people live their lives "at the points of intersection of multiple discursive practices that are intimately linked to history, culture and society" (p. 377). By attending to these points of intersection, this

research deconstructs the meaning of quality in the quality assurance discourses. This study's focus on contextualized meanings draws from Foucault's work on the fluid and socially-constructed nature of language which renders itself to ideological viewpoints (Foucault, 1972). His views on power-driven discourses that shape and constitute knowledge (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Ball, 2015; Olssen, 2003; Saarinen, 2008) inform this research.

From a post-structuralist theoretical stance, this research aims to validate the perspective that our social world not only occurs around us, but is created by us and at the same time imposes on us in ways that we may not be aware. Language can be used to construct and reinforce meanings (Ball, 2015; Brady & Bates, 2016; Fairclough, 1993; Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004; Gillies & Alldred, 2002). Multiple meanings for conveying academic quality are expected in this research. Which dominant narratives eclipse other ways of understanding quality are probed. By problematizing the notion of quality, the research explores how the plurality of interpretations are reconciled.

This critical scrutiny of an institutional administrative process inspects the social construction of academic quality. The purpose of the research undertaken is, firstly, to delve into how people understand quality and, secondly, to discuss what underpins their views. With a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis, this exploratory case study contemplates how power struggles within our discourses may lead to the exclusion of ethical principles in the current quality assurance framework. This study questions quality assurance as a value-free and unbiased administrative process. The research intends to expose assumptions and hopes to spur new discussions on alternative frameworks, especially if the current form is found to be deficient or incongruent with higher education.

Ontario setting. Ontario is disproportionately underrepresented in the academic literature considering it is home to more universities than any other province in the country and, therefore, offers numerous potential sites for research. Ontario is well-positioned for study not only by virtue of being Canada's most populous region with over twenty degree-granting universities, but also because of its Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) coming to the end of the first eight-year cycle of implementation. With the QAF about to enter its second phase, it is auspicious timing to interrogate perspectives on quality assurance and definitions of quality. This exploratory case study investigates an institutional enactment of Ontario's quality assurance framework at a time when the province prepares for its own external audit. At the time of writing this thesis, COU is actively recruiting a new Senior Director (Academic) to lead the Quality Council into its second phase of implementation when Ontario's quality assurance framework will be reviewed and possibly, revised. The timing of this study coincides with this opportunity for proponents of new approaches to quality assurance to advocate for change. Alternative ways of conceiving quality could result in the revamping of the current framework to better serve ethical goals.

Case study methodology. A case study is an in-depth study of a phenomenon or process and uses data from multiple sources (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Shareia, 2016; Stake, 1994; Yin, 2014; Yin & Darnella, 2007). Yin and Darnella (2007) claim a case study "focuses on single entities – an individual, organization, decision, community, and the like" (p. 77). In so far as one specific quality assurance process at a single institution is observed for this exploratory case study, this research fits into Yin and Darnella's description of a case study. Yazan (2015), however, adds that a spectrum of case study methodologies exists and spans across different theoretical perspectives. Case study research can be considered through a

positivist lens (Yin, 2014) as well as viewed within a post-structuralist perspective (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mohammed, Peter, Gastaldo, & Howell, 2015). The continuum of case study methodologies allows for both quantitative and qualitative researchers from diverse disciplines to access descriptive data and delve deeply into a variety of research topics. A case study can make valuable contributions to qualitative research, particularly when incorporating discourse analysis (Carl, 2005; Carmel, 1999; Mohammed, Peter, Gastaldo, & Howell, 2015; Ramos et al., 2013). More explanation on the decision to undertake an exploratory case study is presented in the methodology chapter (Chapter 3).

Post-structuralist discourse analysis. This method of analyzing discourse was discussed by Angermuller (2014):

Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis can be said to be directed against three theoretical adversaries: the humanist, who believes in autonomous subjects as the source and origin of social and linguistic activity; the realist, who believes objective realities that exist independently of discourse; and the hermeneuticist, who believes in a world of transparent and homogenous meaning (p. 5).

Contrary to Angermuller's presentation of the realist and hermeneuticist, a post-structuralist magnifies multiple subjective realities formed within our discourses. A post-structuralist discourse analysis also opposes the humanist view that subjects are entirely autonomous since people are influenced by the discourses that encircle them in ways they are unaware unless they take pause and critically reflect. Certain knowledges are privileged in the discourses and how they project a particular kind of power upon their environments is interrogated. The questioning of concepts previously unchallenged is what educational leaders should offer to the institutions where they lead. It is through this critical interrogation that educational leaders can achieve goals that are socially just and enrich learning experiences.

By way of a post-structuralist discourse analysis, this study addresses the impermanence of language (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Bacchi, 2000; Rameriz, 2014; Miller, 2015). This investigation recognizes the plurality that can arise in discourses and that power relations can create structures of governance. To this end, a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis method is embedded in this exploratory case study and is utilized as an entry point for examining definitions of quality. One may presume that locating and assessing quality is *the* most central aspect of quality assurance. However, upon closer inspection, the main goals of quality assurance may perhaps have more to do with economic well-being than assuring quality. Through a post-structuralist lens, this research recognizes how social practices can curb the intentions of assuring academic quality and create new ways of conceiving higher education altogether. In doing so, ethical issues that may be overlooked. Figure 1 portrays Fairclough's (2010) three dimensions of discourse (text, discursive practice, and social practice) to demonstrate how the elements of this study delve into the quality assurance discourse as social practice.

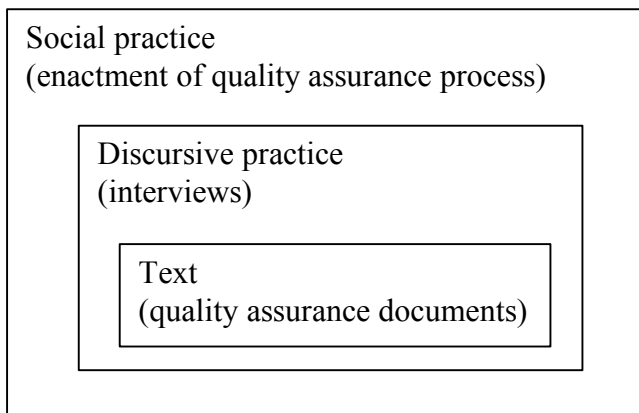


Figure 1. Fairclough's (2010) dimensions of discourse adapted for this study

Significance of the research

This next section states the key features of this research and the anticipated contributions this study can make to the existing body of knowledge on quality assurance in higher education. Other researchers have studied the term quality as it pertains specifically to quality assurance in higher education (Cabalin, 2015; Gillies, 2008; Saarinen, 2008). Like these studies, this research examines how meanings are discursively constructed and socially situated. However, this exploratory case study is unique in that it problematizes quality in a Canadian (Ontario) context. As well, this study includes reflections from a scholar practitioner who observed an institutional quality assurance process while in motion. Finally, this study inserts an ethical lens to approaching quality assurance. The following section elaborates on the features of this research that make it valuable and distinct.

Challenging assumptions. This study responds to the call in the scholarly literature for university leaders to be critical of accepted practices (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Cabalin, 2015; Elliott, 2012; Furman, 2012; Romanowski, 2014; Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011). A statement written by Kincheloe (1999) almost two decades ago captured my attention:

Questions of efficiency and hyperrationality drive educational purpose, not questions of what knowledge is of most worth and what kind of education makes for moral citizens (p. 77).

An interest in whether a contemporary quality assurance process would yield similar findings found in the academic literature prompted this study. It is my intention to create a heightened awareness of how the definition of quality is the result of dominant ways of thinking.

Quality assurance is presently a widespread and unchallenged administrative exercise imposed on universities. According to Tutak, Bondy, and Adams (2011), researchers and educational leaders should be asking “about ‘the way things are’ and wondering how they

might be done differently” (p. 66). This coincides with Elliott’s (2012) assertions that educational leaders should question conventional practice. This research hopes to motivate educational leaders to critically reflect on the discourses which steer the directions of the administrative practices they enact. The intention of this research is to offer educational leaders insight on how the definition of academic quality is taken-for-granted. A significant portion of the literature reports a neoliberal marketization of higher education (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Brown, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Law, 2010; Lycke, 2004; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Singh, 2011). With a neoliberal rationale, quality assurance practices have changed how universities operate and are governed. I argue it is incumbent upon us to critique the foundational premise of a process that has become a global phenomenon.

Educational leaders are urged to critically reflect on their practice (Gillies & Alldred, 2012; Boler, 1999; Elliott, 2015; Fallon & Paquette, 2014; Furman, 2012; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004; Kellner, 2003; Kincheloe, 1999; Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011). Dremel and Matic (2014) call for a stand against “discursive determinism and the consequent view of social actors as impotent and passive” (p. 163). This study aims to provide educational leaders insight that meanings are socially constructed and discourses are ideologically infused. Only when explicitly defining that which is implied can we fully engage in discussions on what are the priorities for higher education. Moreover, by understanding the underlying assumptions can educational leaders take the first step towards conceiving alternative models of quality assurance which may be better suited to facilitate improving academic programs at universities.

Inserting an administrative staff perspective. This exploratory case study distinguishes itself from others in that it is research undertaken by an administrative staff

member. In addition to data collected from interviews with faculty administrators, this research includes observations from a scholar practitioner who holds an administrative staff position. Full-time university support staff differ from faculty administrators in that they offer an operational perspective based on their experiences from working behind-the-scenes in support of academic and non-academic procedures. They, perhaps more than others, are more keenly aware of the power relations embedded in our discourses. Administrative staff are often also able to draw from more years of experience than faculty administrators who typically rotate in and out of their roles. This exploratory case study offers a glimpse of how administrative staff partake in an institutional quality assurance process.

There are staff in every administrative office at universities who have a hand in supporting the academy in some way, shape or form. Administrative staff work at the frontlines and backstage to deliver support to students and faculty at varying levels at a university. They are the eyes and ears of an institution and yet, they are often invisible when it comes to accolades for institutional achievements. The perspective of those who are engaged in operationalizing quality assurance is absent from the existing body of research. This study is unique as it draws attention to a stakeholder group that is mostly omitted in the literature. While several studies focus on quality assurance in higher education from the perspective of academics (Brady & Bates, 2016; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Filippakou, 2011) or students (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Cheng, 2011; Finney & Finney, 2010), there is very little research that gives voice to full-time administrative staff. Administrative staff whose work involves quality assurance practices are a neglected key stakeholder group whose viewpoints can offer insight on administrative processes. Thus, there is an administrative myopia in the existing academic literature that may

limit the possibilities of how concerns associated with quality assurance may be addressed. Administrative staff could and should contribute to the discussions on how new pathways forward can be imagined for quality assurance. Their observations could potentially raise themes and identify issues not evident to faculty and students. This study with a scholar practitioner perspective advocates for the inclusion of this stakeholder group to aid in the discovery of new solutions for problems in higher education.

Presenting Canadian content. This exploratory case study of an institutional quality assurance process contributes to the literature with research taking place in a Canadian setting. A review of the existing research on quality assurance in higher education showcases an abundance of studies spanning across the world, including Europe (Barbieri, 2015; Barnett & Parry, 2014; Cooper, 2007; Harvey, 2005; Lycke, 2004), Australia (Anderson, 2006; Reid, 2009), the United States (Bogue, 1998; Finney & Finney, 2010), Chile (Cabalin, 2015), and Ethiopia (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012). However, only a modest number of studies relate to quality assurance taking place at Canadian universities. This study contributes to the relatively modest Canadian content by providing an Ontario example. The few studies in the literature that do occur within a Canadian context focus on external regulations and rankings (Cramer & Page, 2007; Heap, 2013; Johnston, 2013; Jones, Shanahan, & Goyan, 2001; Page, 1995; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). This research also distinguishes itself in that the exploratory case study looks inward and offers insight into the enactment of an institutional quality assurance process.

Advancing ethical leadership. Through reflection, this study also applies an ethical lens to the Canadian context. Elliott (2015) claims there is a dual purpose to educational leadership. According to him, “It is the twin elements of individual agency (the capacity of

educational leaders to choose to resist market forces) together with moral purpose (the ethical aims of education) that have been missing from educational leadership and leadership research” (p. 312). Tuana (2014) concurs that ethical leadership should be at the forefront of all endeavours in education. With the inclusion of the six guiding principles as a conceptual guide for this study, the notion of quality is explored and deconstructed in several different ways. Social justice and ethical considerations are presented as part of this principle-based approach to the literature and data. This research encourages an ethical leadership perspective to educational leadership work in higher education, particularly pertaining to quality assurance processes.

Proposing new frameworks. If contemporary universities find themselves subject to quality assurance practices that disregard social justice in pursuit of operational efficiencies (Blackmore, 2013; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), then educational leaders need to propose new frameworks that can re-direct institutional priorities to ethical aims. Educational leaders who apply an ethical leadership lens to their work can supplant the current meaning of quality that neglects moral imperatives and re-frame quality in a more socially-oriented definition. Alternative approaches are needed to steer the focus away from simple technical compliance to probing critically what are the fundamental objectives of a university education. Educational leaders are urged to think beyond the boundaries of the debate surrounding what are the best tools for measuring academic quality and to conceive quality more broadly so that the social impact of academic programs is under scrutiny. Without an awareness of the social good, the next generation of students enters society with a narrow understanding of how their actions have a broader impact. This research suggests potential frameworks for quality assurance that can support more social awareness.

Definition of Terms

The following section provides the reader with terminology that pertains to this exploration of university quality assurance. A clear understanding of how the research approaches key concepts and terms supports the reader's appreciation of the issues and perspectives presented in this study.

Accountability. Closely associated with quality assurance processes in higher education, accountability is related to the outward demonstration of efforts to be more fiscally responsible and reducing financial waste at universities (Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Reid, 2009; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). Kai (2009) expands on the definition of accountability to include "the justification of an activity; it means proving, the most efficient manner, responsibility for the performance of certain results" (p. 40). In addition to a rationale for creating cost-saving efficiencies, accountability is construed to mean oversight and governance (Cabalin, 2015). For example, Moller (2009) explains accountability as "a hierarchical practice of bureaucracy" (p. 38). This places a greater emphasis in quality assurance practices on regulation and performance than democratic school leadership and enhancements to educational endeavours.

Assurance. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines assurance as:

- 1) the state of being assured;
- 2) something that inspires or tends to inspire confidence; and
- 3) the act or action of assuring someone or something

("Assurance", 2018).

This suggests an act of convincing someone or promising something that expectations will be met. That is, it can be interpreted as a commitment to deliver on a pledge. With regards to academic programs, universities commit to delivering academic programs of acceptable quality.

Discourse. This interrogation of quality assurance discourses at one Ontario university incorporates views asserted by Foucault (1972/1977/1980/2000/2011). Foucault inspired many scholars with his views on language, knowledge, and power (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Aranovich, 2016; Bacchi, 2000; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Ball, 2015; Baxter, 2002; Cahill, 2015; Dixon, 2013; Graham, 2011; Mohammed, Peter, Gastaldo, Howell, 2015; Olssen 2003; Picciotto, 2017; Powers, 2007). As Foucault (1972) describes “The unity of a discourse is based not so much on the permanence and uniqueness of an object as on the space in which various objects emerge and are continuously transformed” (p. 36). He asserts that discourse is a technology of power that allows dominant ideology to be normalized and reproduced. Through social discourses, individuals enact and are acted upon such that they are both producers and products of dominant ideology. As such, systems of belief become normalized and ingrained in cultural practices. Correspondingly, Brady and Bates (2015) claim “discourse is the constitutive of particular social orders and, consequently, far from being a 'neutral' medium for representing reality, both expresses and enacts a hegemonic struggle for power and the legitimacy of knowledge” (p. 159). The extended meaning of discourse is what Young (2008) explains as “societal meaning-making systems such as institutional power” (p. 2). Throughout this exploratory case study, how discourses not only form the basis of our understanding of quality but also allow governing entities to insert themselves in higher education will be examined.

Educational leaders. Educational leaders are regarded as individuals who are in positions of power to direct and influence organizations. While some individuals without positional power can also affect change, this research recognizes that those in official leadership roles are able to advocate for change using formal channels within the infrastructure of their own universities as well as liaise with external governing bodies. This exploratory case

study specifically targets faculty administrators who are Deans, Associate/Vice Deans, Chairs or Program Directors who can potentially alter how quality assurance is enacted in their departments.

Governmentality. Foucault's (1994) notion of governmentality underscores the use of various techniques that permit greater governance. Jessop (2007) explains Foucault considers governmentality as a set of practices that operate on the state. As elaborated by Cotoi (2011), governmentality in its neoliberal form allows governments to intervene in all affairs. Thus, governmentality describes the network of procedures and practices through which power circulates.

Hegemony. Hegemony, that is, the cultural dominance of one social construction over another, represents the presiding school of thought in any given historical moment. According to Foucault (1972), "Theoretical choices exclude or imply, in the statement in which they are made, the formation of certain concepts" (p. 82). It is the most vocalized theoretical framework in the discourse that legitimizes a specific world view (Berkovich, 2014; Rottmann, 2007; Tutak, Bondy, & Adams, 2011). As one belief system or ideology rises in dominance, others are suppressed (Filippakou, 2011). An understanding that hegemony exists and imposes on our culture informs this research.

Higher education. Higher education is terminology broadly used in the literature to reference academic pursuits following elementary and secondary schooling (Blackmur, 2010; Bogue, 1998; Chun, 2002; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Filippakou, 2011; Raaper, 2015).

Universities, colleges, and polytechnics are sometimes included in discussions of higher education, although a consistent definition is not explicitly stated in the academic literature.

This research focuses on quality assurance of degree programs at universities. For the purpose of this study, the terms ‘higher education’ and ‘university’ are used interchangeably.

Neoliberalism. Generally accepted as the dominant framework in contemporary society, neoliberalism merges liberal prose and capitalism (Rottmann, 2007). It is explained by Cotoi (2011) “as an umbrella concept or a badge that helps to create some kind of vague and simplistic political alignment” (p. 109). Higher education framed in neoliberal economic terms pervade everyday discourses and permeate discussions pertaining to quality assurance. For instance, universities are perceived as enterprises (Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Reid, 2009), education is a commodity (Blackmore, 2009; Cabalin, 2015), and students are both funding units (Dennis, 2012) as well as consumers (Barnett & Parry, 2014; Becket & Brookes, 2008; Brady & Bates, 2016; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Finney & Finney, 2010; Kincheloe, 1999; Law, 2010). The neoliberal framing of higher education is examined as part of this exploration of quality assurance.

Post-structuralism. Post-structuralism is a philosophical stance that questions the monolithic associations included in our everyday discourses (Aranovich, 2016; Dixon, 2013; Kellner, 2003; Larsson, 2015; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015). The 1980s saw the rise of post-structuralism and its focus on discursive practices (Larsson, 2015). Post-structuralism encompasses constructivism and pluralism (Adams & Buetow, 2014). A post-structuralist perspective asserts that knowledge is socially situated (Kellner, 2003). Graham (2011) claims the main objective of post-structuralism is to question that which we take for granted. Post-structuralist critiques can challenge claims found in educational discourse (Niesche & Gowlett, 2015). While Foucault, himself, did not identify as a post-structuralist, his writings have informed post-structuralist inquiries into power-based meaning construction. Foucault’s (1982)

description of a network of regulated communications is relevant to current quality assurance practices and thus, germane to the post-structuralist approach utilized for this study:

Take, for example, an educational institution: the disposal of its space, the meticulous regulations which govern its internal life, the different activities which are organized there, the diverse persons who live there or meet one another, each with his own function, his well-defined character – all these things constitute a block of capacity-communication-power. The activity which ensures apprenticeship and the acquisition of aptitudes or types of behavior is developed there by means of a whole ensemble of regulated communications (lessons, questions and answers, orders, exhortations, coded signs of obedience, differentiation marks the “value” of each person and of the levels of knowledge) and by the means of a whole series of power processes (enclosure, surveillance, reward and punishment, the pyramidal hierarchy) (p. 787).

It is through a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist lens that this research approaches what meanings are associated to academic quality.

Quality. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines quality as “a peculiar and essential character, an inherent feature, a degree of excellence or a distinguishing attribute” (“Quality”, 2018). For the purposes of this research, quality denotes the feature of academic programs offered at universities that is, presumably, the central focal point for quality assurance. The terms ‘quality’ and ‘academic quality’ are used interchangeably.

Quality assurance. Quality assurance initially was conceived as the elimination of factory defects on the assembly line (Crozier, Curvale, Dearlove, Helle, & Henard, 2006; Morley, 2003; Sliwa & Wilcox, 2008; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Harvey and Green (1993) note “Quality assurance is about ensuring that there are mechanisms, procedures, and processes in place to ensure that the desired quality, however defined and measured, is delivered” (p. 19). Commonly, quality assurance in higher education is associated with a set of performance indicators (Bogue, 1998; Brady & Bates, 2016; Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Law, 2010). Quality assurance for universities typically involves audits, accreditations and periodic reviews.

Self-study. An external review typically consists of a self-study (Heap, 2013). Self-studies provide organizations with the opportunity to reflect on their activities. A self-study is the submitted document an academic unit or institution ordinarily produces for a quality assurance review. The intent of the text is for departments to describe themselves to the external reviewers. It is expected departments will reflect on their strengths and deficiencies.

Stakeholder. Like quality assurance, the term stakeholder is borrowed from the business sector. It signifies any individual or group that has a vested interest in the success of the endeavour under study. According to Cheng (2011), stakeholders of quality assurance are “individuals or groups regarded as having a legitimate interest in quality of higher education” (p. 3). Students, parents, faculty, alumni, government officials, employers, and the public are ordinarily perceived as stakeholders. The participants in this study represent one key stakeholder group and are comprised of faculty administrators engaged in quality assurance processes at the selected institution.

Thesis Outline

This thesis is composed of six chapters. Chapter one introduces the reader to the main ideas and background on the topic chosen for the research. The two research questions are stated and a summary of the significance of this inquiry acquaints the reader to this exploratory case study of an institutional quality assurance process at one Ontario university. Definitions of terms support the reader’s understanding of quality assurance as it applies to higher education.

Chapter two continues to introduce the reader to the topic of quality assurance in higher education through highlights from the academic literature. The literature review includes a brief timeline of key milestones for quality assurance around the world with special notations on the circumstances that precipitated a new quality assurance framework in Ontario. The literature

review delves into the ways neoliberalism has influenced the framing of higher education. The remaining portion of the second chapter uses six guiding principles and Foucault's ideas on discourse, knowledge, and power to present findings from other studies as well as to suggest alternative ways for approaching quality assurance.

Chapter three describes the rationale for a qualitative research design and details the chosen exploratory case study methodology. The inclusion of observations and reflections recorded during the enactment of an institutional quality assurance process provides a scholar practitioner perspective. The chapter discusses the selection of data sources and elaborates on the methodology supported by a post-structuralist discourse analysis. The limitations to the research are indicated at the end of this methodology chapter.

Chapter four summarizes the findings from multiple data sources. The examination of quality resource documents is presented. Then the chapter continues with the findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with faculty administrators who were engaged in quality assurance at the chosen institution. These findings are described and organized using the analytical structure adapted from Barnett and Parry (2014). Additional contextual data is offered through the scholar practitioner's field notes. The emotional climate, uncertainty, and contradictions that surrounded the quality assurance process are noted.

Chapter five discusses the analysis of the findings and any corresponding alignment with the academic literature. Following the presentation of the findings, the discussion chapter focuses on emergent themes. The fifth chapter departs from using the structure of the six guiding principles as the discussion reconfigures into thematic analysis for each of the two research questions. The chapter shares how quality is presented in the institutional resource

documents and within the interviews with faculty administrators at the one university in Ontario.

The final chapter offers over-arching commentary on the study with recommendations for future research. The implications of the findings for this exploratory case study are discussed in the last chapter. The chapter ends with closing statements on how the findings from this exploratory case study can enrich the field of higher education, encourage educational leaders to challenge assumptions, and inspire alternative frameworks for quality assurance in higher education.

Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the research topic to the reader. The research questions, what prompted the study, the initial analytical framework, Foucault's influence, the Canadian (Ontario) context, and the scholar practitioner perspective were highlighted. Most significantly, the Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist perspective that was applied to this exploratory case study was discussed. My theoretical and conceptual frameworks were introduced to the reader to explain how my exploration of quality assurance discourses was contemplated with ethical goals for higher education in mind. The next chapter summarizes the review of the literature that supported this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This exploratory case study investigates two questions pertaining to the discourses related to quality assurance in higher education: 1) How do quality assurance texts at one Ontario university describe academic quality? and; 2) How is quality understood by key stakeholders, namely university faculty administrators who have responsibilities related to the institutional quality assurance process at the chosen Ontario university? This study intends to equip educational leaders with an understanding of how quality currently is conceived. Two major influences gave this study its initial design. Barnett and Parry's (2014) study and guiding principles provided a principle-based navigational approach for interrogating the academic literature. As well, Foucault's views on discourse coupled with a post-structuralist perspective were applied to this study. These two influences provided a preliminary framing for the deconstruction of the quality assurance discourses.

If a clear understanding of quality eludes us, then it begs the question how can one know that the process of quality assurance has achieved its intended purposes. When the very object of study has not been elucidated, then the search for that object is compromised. Other authors have asked similar questions about quality assurance in higher education. Ball (2015) wondered "Are we doing the things for the 'right' reasons – and how can we know?" (p. 259). Chun (2002) inquired "Are we indeed measuring what we *should* be measuring?" (p. 16). Additionally, Webster (2015) deliberated "Are we valuing what we measure or measuring what we value?" (p. 3). It was with these questions in mind that this research explored academic quality at one Ontario university. Hence, the purpose of this chapter is to offer a review of relevant literature and discuss how quality, in terms of university quality assurance, is operationalized.

This chapter consists of three main sections. First, a brief history of quality assurance and a timeline of some important events that have impacted different parts of the world are included. Since this exploratory case study occurs at a Canadian university, a few dates particular to Ontario are noted. The second section organizes the review of the literature under six sub-sections, representing six selected guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics). The chapter concludes with a summary of some of Foucault's views. A Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist lens supports this research with an understanding that discourses can both reflect and constitute our world views.

Brief History of Quality Assurance

Over the last 25 years, the practice of quality assurance in higher education has evolved into a global phenomenon (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Becket & Brookes, 2008; Cheng, 2011; Heap, 2013; Hoecht, 2006; Rameriz, 2014; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Quality assurance originally arose from commercial/industrial beginnings in the manufacturing sector and was transferred to higher education with significant proliferation occurring in the 1990s (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Sliwa & Wilcox, 2008; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Educational reforms included granting credibility to external rankings and other quantitative performance indicators for assessing academic quality (Cramer & Page, 2007; Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Languille, 2014; Rowlands, 2012). The introduction of quality assurance to higher education shifted the relationship between state and universities whereby the governments assumed a greater regulatory role (Abbas & McLean; 2007; Barnett & Parry, 2014; Birch & Miller, 2012; Hoecht, 2006; Vidovich, 2004). By insisting on quantifying the intangible essence of education through measurements of efficiency and vocational relevance, quality assurance became entrenched with neoliberal ideals.

A timeline provides an outline of how quality assurance in higher education unfolded in different parts of the world. To give the reader some context, Table 2 offers key dates for quality assurance from around the globe. This table intentionally includes Ontario-specific information, which currently is underrepresented in the literature.

Table 2. *Timeline of milestones for quality assurance*

YEAR	ITEM
1911	Frederick Taylor wrote a scientific management theory book
1920	W.A. Shewhart developed a statistical method for quality control to reduce production flaws
1972	Ministry of Colleges and University was established in Ontario, Canada
1982	Ontario Council of Graduate Studies (OCGS) began external reviews of graduate programs
1986	W. Edwards Deming popularized Total Quality Management (TQM)
1990	Academic Audit Unit was established in the UK
1992	Daniel Seymore wrote Total Quality Management in higher education
1992	Further and Higher Education Act of Parliament passed in the UK
1993	Ministry of Education and Training (MET) was established in Ontario, Canada
1993	quality rounds by Committee for Quality Assurance began in Higher Education in Australia
1996	undergraduate program reviews started in Ontario, Canada
1997	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education was established in the UK
1999	Bologna Declaration was signed
1999	Ministry of Education and Training divided into two separate ministries in Ontario, Canada
1999	Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) was established in Ontario, Canada
2005	University Undergraduate Degree Level Expectations (UUDLEs) were developed in Ontario, Canada
2005	Graduate University Degree Level Expectations (GUDLEs) were developed in Ontario, Canada
2010	Ontario Quality Council was established
2010	Ontario Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) was approved
2010	National Degree Framework was created in Australia
2010	Subject Benchmarks Program was developed in the UK
2011	Universities created Institutional Quality Assurance Process as mandated by Ontario's QAF
2012	new Quality Code was introduced in the UK
2013	a worldwide Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) was created
2016	Ontario's MTCU was renamed to Ministry of Advanced Education & Skills Development (MAESD)
2018	MAESD reverted to MTCU
2018	External review of Ontario's QAF due

It is noteworthy to mention the ministry name changes in Ontario over the last few decades as it also offers insight on shifting government priorities for education that precipitated the current quality control mechanisms. In 1972, the Ontario Ministry of College and Universities co-existed in parallel but independent from the Ministry of Education. In 1993, the Ministry of

College and Universities merged with the Ministry of Education to create a new Ministry of Education and Training. A few years later, the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities (MTCU) was established in 1999. In 2016, the MTCU was renamed to the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development (MAESD) only to revert back to the name MTCU less than two years later. The name changes for the ministry coincided with the growing interest in quality assurance practices in higher education. The emphasis on training signified a focus on an instrumental value for universities and colleges that would prepare students for the job market. This is an example of the neoliberal influence on higher education. Universities have been transformed from sites of higher learning to training grounds for producing the future workforce. The focus on creating human capital for industry displays a tendency to apply commercial sector reasoning to higher education.

Manufacturing education. In the latter part of the twentieth century, quality assurance was popularized in factories as a cost-saving measure. Through improved technical methods of checking for variability, companies reduced manufacturing errors in their products (Crozier, Curvale, Dearlove, Helle, & Henard, 2006; Morley, 2003). Commercial businesses sought ways to decrease their costs by producing fault-free goods. Initially, an *a posteriori* tactic involved the discovery of flaws after the fact, which then led to machinery enhancements to correct errors on production line. By the late 1960s, an *a priori* predictive modelling approach changed the way business leaders conceived of quality assurance (Weckenmann, Akkasoglu, & Werner, 2015). By learning from past experiences and anticipating risks, businesses were better able to predict deficiencies.

It was historically significant that quality assurance made this temporal leap from a posteriori to a priori, since this then opened the door to transfer concepts of quality assurance to

other sectors (Bogue, 1998). The academic literature pointed to how marketplace discourses employed by governments were used to enmesh quality with accountability (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Bogue, 1998; Cabalin, 2015; Chun, 2002; Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, & Broadbent, 2003; Hoecht, 2006; Kai, 2009; Law, 2010; Moller, 2009). Kai (2009) noted quality assurance evaluative measures became intertwined with the concepts of accountability and efficiency:

To sum up, accountability in higher education is a concept related to efficiency, effectiveness, and performance evaluation; it calls for proving, by effective means, that higher education has attained the predetermined results and performance. In the domain of higher education, assuming accountability is manifested as properly and judiciously utilizing allocated resources to achieve avowed goals (p. 40).

The quality assurance discourses created a new identity for universities contingent on productivity and economic viability.

Significant growth in the 1990s. Considerable activity and development for quality assurance in higher education occurred in the 1990s. According to Elassy (2015) “in the 1990s, the issues concerning quality changed greatly and came to be seen as something that could be defined and measured” (p. 251). Governments pushed for more quality assurance practices in higher education (Cheng, 2003; Dennis, 2016; Romanowski, 2014; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). In 1991, a Canadian publication *Maclean’s* magazine began to produce an annual guide to universities with institutional rankings, which created a linear ordering of universities from worst to best. In 1992, the UK government passed the Further and Higher Education Act (Dennis, 2016). That same year, several publications were written regarding the application of Total Quality Management (TQM) principles applied to higher education (Falk, 1992; Heverly & Cornesky, 1992; Masters & Leiker, 1992; Seymour, 1992). This firmly established reporting practices for universities to demonstrate to governments measures of quality. Dennis (2016) wrote “while 1992 impacts only on the UK, the commensurability of educational and business

imperatives has a transnational echo” (p. 121). This suggested that TQM was a precursor to other initiatives that arose shortly afterwards. Most notably, a pan-Europe agreement was signed in 1999 to harmonize higher education offerings and herald the adoption of quality assurance as a mechanism for standardizing curriculum across universities. This agreement was called the Bologna Declaration.

The Bologna process. In 1999, the Bologna Declaration was signed by countries in Europe which promoted increased student mobility across the continent (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Esyutina, Fearon, & Leatherbarrow, 2013; Heap, 2013; Lozano, Boni, Peris, & Hueso, 2012; Reid, 2009). The exercise came to be known as the Bologna process and several authors acknowledged this as one of the catalysts for growing interest in quality assurance practices in higher education (Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Kristoffersen & Lindeberg, 2004; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Lycke, 2004). By the early 2000s, North American institutions were also heavily engaged in creating quality assurance processes. The government discourses focused on the need for universities to demonstrate accountability to the public (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Bogue, 1998; Chun, 2002; Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, & Broadbent, 2003; Kai, 2009; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). Although the notion of academic quality was only presented implicitly, quality assurance in higher education continued to grow into a worldwide trend.

Massification. The end of the 20th century also saw governments incentivize widening participation in higher education (Ball, 2012; Elliott, 2012; Reid, 2009; Rowlands, 2012; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Rintoul and MacLellan (2016) described the expansion of enrollments in Ontario:

In 1963, there were 14 Ontario universities, with a combined undergraduate enrollment of 35,000 students; however, four decades later, Ontario’s full-time equivalent enrollment grew to approximately 400,000 in universities, with only five new universities created to help handle this extraordinary increase (p. 36).

Growth in the number of students, often described in the academic literature as massification, at first glance seemingly represented an effort to increase access to higher education for all segments of the populations (Harvey & Green, 1993). However, upon closer inspection, the enlarged student intake that occurred across the globe had little impact on reducing social stratification (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Apple, 2001; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Kincheloe, 1999). Initiatives that brought in more students into universities did not address the fact that not everyone started on equal footing in the first place. Access to a university education, especially to the most prestigious programs, was extended only to those who could incur the cost of university (Singh, 2011). Inherently, the public policies designed to increase access to higher education were coupled with rising tuition and thus, participation was determined by who had funds available to them or were willing to take on substantial debt.

Reduced funding. For the last 25 years, quality assurance spread in practice at universities around the world. Originating in the Global North and gaining influence in more developing countries, governments have paradoxically promoted quality assurance during the same time period as a reduction of public funds available to universities. Several scholars noted the establishment of quality assurance in higher education was accompanied with diminishing government funding (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Bracci, Humphrey, Moll, & Steccolini, 2015; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Rameriz, 2014; Saarinen, 2008). Ingleby (2015) summarized “The assertion that the government cannot pay the cost for higher education and the subsequent creation of consumers of higher education appears to be an interventionist strategy that is designed to create the marketisation of higher education” (p. 522). Quality assurance acted as a release valve for governments to reduce the pressure to support universities.

Singh (2011) described quality assurance in higher education as “issues of value for money from public subsidies of higher education, improved operational efficiencies and greater competitiveness, protection for students, responsiveness to ‘world of work’ skills needs, and facilitation of stakeholder choices through greater information” (p. 487). The discourses related to quality assurance in higher education made it difficult to dispute it or one would risk the appearance of being absurd and unethical in challenging the protection of student interests and stakeholders access to information.

Meanwhile, universities grappled with how to reconcile the gap between the time-saving, cost-cutting ‘do-more-with-less’ business principle inferred by quality assurance reviews and the intellectual or relational aspects intrinsic to educational programs. Teaching and learning takes time and require learning environments as hosts to expertise as well as, in some instances, expensive facilities. Universities were expected to thrive while working under deprived conditions. Rameriz (2014) noted “it can be observed that increased interest in quality assurance is frequently connected to reductions in government funding for higher education, privatization, massification, greater sense of market-like competition among institutions and mistrust of the self-regulation” (p. 124). Universities started to compete for market share when it came to recruiting students and garnering private sector support.

As such, quality assurance discourses with an emphasis on efficiency emerged in public policy at the same time governments were retracting their funds and demanding universities to increase their enrollments (Abbas, Ashwin, & McLean, 2012; Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Elliott, 2012; Harvey & Green, 1993; Rameriz, 2014; Rowlands, 2012; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). Growth in enrollment, reduced funds, and greater pressure on universities to demonstrate their abilities to deliver high quality

programs were utilized by the government to garner public support. In the political discourses, while these activities seemed to be aligned to better serve public interests in the political discourses, they in actuality operated at cross purposes with each other. Citton's (2013) critique included "the very mechanisms set in place to promote the production of 'excellence' often tend to stifle it" (p. 71). It should be acknowledged that efforts to enhance the quality of academic programs were often hampered by the withdrawal, in some instances, of government resources.

Quality assurance in Ontario. Ontario was not insulated from the impact of governmental pursuits of quality assurance (Rintoul & MacLellan, 2016). In Canada, the political changes affecting higher education institutions pointed to decreased federal block funding and greater involvement of the private sector (Shanahan & Jones, 2007). Like other parts of the world, Canada saw regulatory bodies employ a two-prong approach to higher education. On the one hand, governments reduced public funding to universities. Public policy discourses deflected from diminishing financial support and steered the conversation towards greater fiscal accountability. On the other hand, governments employed quality assurance measures as a mechanism of control. Rather than address the lower proportion of public funds that supported universities' operating budgets, the focus turned to institutions complying with government-mandated quality assurance processes.

In Ontario, reviews of academic programs shifted from being commissioned by the Council of Ontario Universities (COU) to being instigated by the new Quality Council. Previously, graduate programs under the auspices of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) and baccalaureate programs under the Undergraduate Program Review Audit Committee (UPRAC) were subject to reviews that involved less templates and the reviewers

were collegial in their investigations. Over the last two decades in Ontario, however, external audits of Ontario university academic programs transitioned from a consultative process for reviews to a more highly prescribed and structured mechanism for assuring academic quality. In 2005, as a precursor to implementing a new quality assurance framework for Ontario universities, COU-mandated templates for delineating undergraduate and graduate degree level expectations were distributed. All universities needed to explicitly state what skills and learning students were expected to achieve upon completion of their academic programs. In 2010, the Ontario Council of Academic Vice-Presidents (OCAV) created the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance (Quality Council) to oversee quality assurance protocols. The Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) in Ontario was approved by the Council of Ontario Universities Heads. Subsequently, all universities in the province were required to create their own corresponding Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) by the end of the 2011-2012 academic year.

Currently, all Ontario universities have their own IQAPs and audits of the IQAPs are underway by a COU-appointed panel. Closing on its first eight-year cycle of its Quality Assurance Framework (QAF), the Council of Ontario initiated an external review of its own framework. Over the next two years, Ontario's Quality Council will be tasked to operationalize recommendations resulting from the external review. Shepherded by OCAV, a newly created position of Senior Director (Academic) will act as a special advisor to the President of COU and will revise the framework as needed. This external review and the hiring of a new Senior Director (Academic) may pose an opportunity to make substantive changes to the guidelines in the coming years and hopefully COU will consult the existing body of research, which can

inform ways to re-calibrate the quality assurance framework to better serve ethical goals in higher education.

Defining Quality Part I

Elassy (2015) indicated “quality is not a modern concept, and it has been used through the ages and through different civilizations” (p. 251). Its long-standing use as a term for discerning one option from another resulted in its meaning assumed to be self-evident. It took on the status of being unquestionable. The definition of quality for academic programs at universities was found in the academic literature to be more tacit than explicitly stated. Harvey and Green (1993) wrote “we all have an intuitive understanding of what quality means but it is often hard to articulate” (p. 10). This study problematized the definition of quality and thus, questioned the unquestionable. By challenging the presupposed meaning of quality, this study aimed to expose and disrupt assumptions as well as delve into what educational goals are being served while others are being neglected.

Lacking clear definition. Finding a definition of quality in the academic literature proved to be an onerous task. Despite the widespread practice of quality assurance in higher education, the term quality lacked clear definition (Anderson, 2006; Barnett & Parry, 2014). Several researchers indicated that quality was not adequately conceived (Blackmur, 2010; Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015). Others noted the meaning was ambiguous (Cabalin, 2015; Saarinen, 2008). It was described as slippery (Harvey & Green, 1993), elusive (Cheng, 2011; Elassy, 2015), contestable (Barnett, 1992; Law, 2010; Rowlands, 2012; Vidovich, 2004), multidimensional (Becket & Brookes, 2008; Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015), and even a pejorative term when referred to in the context of quality assurance (Cheng, 2011). It was identified as an ideological construct (Filippakou,

2011) that was, at times, contradictory (Becket & Brookes, 2008). No consensus was found for the meaning of quality for academic programs in higher education except for agreement that a unitary definition was not possible (Cheng, 2011; Elassy, 2015; Murmura, Casolani, & Bravi, 2016; Schindler, Puls-Elvidge, Welzant, & Crawford, 2015). The task to define quality in higher education was deemed complex and philosophical (Bogue, 1998; Harvey & Green, 1993). It was explained that the various views derived from the rivalry of ideologies in the discourses (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Cabalin, 2015; Law, 2010).

In several instances, authors stated a post-structuralist perspective as they related quality meant different things to different people (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Becket & Brookes, 2008; Cheng, 2011; Elassy, 2015). One way to view the myriad of meanings for quality was to consider the lack of consensus as an outcome of how aimless quality assurance may have become. A focus on ethical considerations may provide direction. Foucault (1972) described “to interpret is a way of reacting to enunciative poverty, and to compensate for it by a multiplication of meaning” (p. 135). The impoverished discourses surrounding quality assurance in higher education resulted in varied ways of expressing quality, all the while it was taken for granted that an agreement existed. Barnett (1992) outlined:

‘Quality’ can be seen as a metaphor for rival views over the aims of higher education. Those contemporary perceptions include the following: technicist (the imposition of technical instruments); collegial (the collective voice of the academic community); epistemic (the territorial claims of particular disciplinary community); consumerist (the claims of the participants or would-be participants); employers (the voice of the labour market accepting the products of the system); professional (the voices of the separate professional bodies); and inspectorial (the voices of the state and other external agencies with an authorized right to inspect higher education and pronounce on what they find) (p. 4).

Following Barnett’s reasoning, while the technicist, consumerist, employer, professional, and inspectorial views have risen in profile, the collegial and voices from the academic community

have receded into the background. Power struggles embedded in discourses have suppressed some views while elevating others (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Filippakou, 2011). Described in a discourse of commonsense (Abbas & McLean, 2007, p. 730), concepts are presented as self-evident. By problematizing the notion of quality, this study aimed to bring to light how power is active in our discourses and expose how dominant framings have been normalized.

A dominant neoliberal framework. Rehmann (2015) discussed:

Neoliberalism presents itself as liberating agency from a patronizing state-bureaucracy; it mobilizes its subjects by permanently interpellating them to be active and creative, to show initiative and to believe optimistically in the success of their efforts. At the same time it calls upon the subjects to submit to the fateful order of the market that regularly and increasingly fails and frustrates the efforts of the many (p. 446).

The quality assurance discourses in higher education were viewed as one example of the application of a neoliberal framework to academic activities (Apple, 2001; Ball, 2012; Brown, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Goldberg, 2006; Gillies, 2008; Picciotto, 2017; Reid, 2009). Universities became commercialized sites (Ball, 2012; Law, 2010; Reid, 2009; Singh, 2011). Students were identified as customers or consumers of higher education (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Cabalin, 2015; Clegg & Smith, 2010, Finney & Finney, 2010; Ingleby, 2015; Kincheloe, 1999; Law, 2010; Raaper, 2015). Law (2010) indicated “students become ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’, the curricula are not taught but ‘delivered’, aims and objectives of courses are changed to ‘learning outcomes’, and understanding and knowledge are replaced by ‘competence’ and ‘information’ respectively” (pp. 64-65). Universities in the past were governed at greater arm’s length with more autonomy and less emphasis on economic principles. In contemporary times, they have been transformed into enterprises directed by managerial sensibilities (Barnett & Parry, 2014; Cabalin, 2015; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Guta, Nixon, & Wilson, 2013; Singh, 2011). Picciotto (2017) recognizes “the most frequent

evaluation governance model is *market driven*” (p. 319). In keeping with the neoliberal framework, quality was closely framed within higher education as either a product or service.

Education as a product. With a neoliberal framework applied to universities, higher education was construed as a product to be consumed by students (Barnett, 1992; Brown, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Guta, Nixon, & Wilson, 2013; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004). This conceptualization of education was accompanied by the assertion that universities were suppliers of a commodity that offer students value for their money (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Barnett & Parry, 2014; Singh, 2011). The value of a university education was increasingly defined by potential earnings after graduation (Brown, 2015; Citton, 2013; Eacott, 2011; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004; Goldberg, 2006; Heap, 2013; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Williams, 2016).

Gibbs and Iacovidou (2004) wrote:

by adopting a notion of educational value commensurate with the return on investment of employability skills, (and homogenises diversity of disciplines into employment skills) higher education reveals itself as designed to provide benefit entitlements for the achievement of explicit criteria, however, relevant or irrelevant these criteria might be, to a fuller, transformative, notion of higher education (p. 113).

A paradigm shift from the greater societal good to individual success emerged in the literature. How one fared in the global market or how much income one could generate for oneself based on the skills imparted on them while at university took prominence over moral and ethical aspects of citizenship.

The prioritization of employment skills framed universities as purveyors of human capital that supply the future workers of the world (Akdag & Swanson, 2018; Ball, 2015; Brown, 2015; Singh, 2011; Williams, 2016). Quality assurance, therefore, operated with the neoliberal assumption that developing the future labour force superseded democratic citizenship (Brown, 2015), thus subverting the notion of public good (Singh, 2011; Williams,

2016). Vocational relevance obscured broader societal needs (Brown, 2015; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Fanghanel, 2007; Filippakou, 2011; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004). According to Singh (2011) “pressures for human capital development to support economic competitiveness jostle with rights-based arguments for inclusion and concerns for upholding the public good purposes of higher education” (pp. 484-485). An emphasis on individual outcomes outweighed students’ contributions to the well-being of society.

Education as a service. A service orientation for higher education was also debated by several authors in the academic literature (Ball, 2012; Bogue, 1998; Brown, 2015; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Cheng, 2011; Hill, 1995; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Murmura, Casolani, & Bravi, 2016). Murmura, Casolani, and Bravi (2016) stood out as proponents of a customer service orientation applied to universities. They concluded higher education would benefit from an evaluation system based on student feedback that rated facilities, faculty knowledge, and staff courtesy. This was in stark contrast to other studies that disputed student satisfaction levels as valid indicators of academic quality (Bogue, 1998; Brown, 2015; Hill, 1995). Bogue (1998) contended “it is possible for some students to be highly satisfied yet remain relatively uneducated” (p. 12). Some even asserted that the neoliberal framing of universities may lead to adverse effects. Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2016) found that students who perceived themselves as consumers and universities as service providers tended to report lower academic results. Cheng’s (2011) study comparing faculty and student perceptions of quality found that student motivation had more influence than teaching practice on learning outcomes. Finney and Finney (2010) reported effective teaching methods and highly motivated students both contributed to transformative learning.

Apple (2001) wrote about changes to education policies that involved “a subtle, but crucial shift in emphasis – one that is not openly discussed as often as it should be – from student needs to student performance and from what the school does for the student to what the student does for the school” (p. 413). This suggested that the current quality assurance practice supplanted, rather than supported, student learning. Correspondingly, Brunetto and Wharton (2005) contended that reduced per capita funding of public universities resulted in higher staff:student ratios and failed to address the needs of students. Should universities make more apparent the adverse effects on student learning, this could circumvent the discourses surrounding quality assurance that detract from shrinking resources and place the onus on students to pay for the gap between operational budgets and government funds. This, in turn, could foster advocacy on the part of the public to pressure governments to allocate additional financial support to universities.

Fitness for purpose. Despite the dilemma of whether a university education was a product or service, the literature gathered around one popular phrase ‘fitness for purpose’. It was frequently coined and cited (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Bloxham & Price, 2015; Cheng, 2011; Harvey & Green, 1993; Heap, 2013; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Murmura, Casolani, & Bravi, 2016). Harvey and Green (1993) explained the notion of fitness for purpose was one approach from the manufacturing sector that conceptually lent itself to education more readily than other economic terms. Academic quality was determined in relation to its ability to meet the intended function or purpose. Although at first glance, there was an elegance and simplicity to a fitness for purpose approach, questions of what purposes and criteria by whose proclamation shed further light on the complexity of defining quality. In particular, scholars described quality in higher education as contextual and relative (Ashcroft &

Rayner, 2012; Becket & Brookes, 2008; Cheng, 2011; Elassy, 2015; Law, 2010; Rameriz, 2014). This made it difficult to discern fitness for purpose.

With the background on quality assurance and definitions of quality in mind, the academic literature is now re-examined as it relates to different ways of conceiving the quality of educational experiences. The next section of this chapter uses six guiding principles to contemplate various aspects of quality and offer new possibilities for framing it.

Barnett and Parry

One reading that was particularly compelling became an initial conceptual structure and analytical framework for this study. Barnett and Parry's (2014) review of quality assurance in the UK included the development of guiding principles intended to generate an impartial report on national quality assurance practices. The adaption of their principles was used to frame the review of the academic literature and highlight pertinent points relevant to this research. The research topic was explored through each of the six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics) to delve into how quality can be understood from multiple perspectives. The principles provided a conceptual road map to help navigate through the literary terrain. While Barnett and Parry specified narrow definitions for their principles, this study allowed for wider interpretations to interrogate quality and quality assurance. The exploration of the literature for each principle is presented in this chapter. Prior to this, these principles are summarized in the following paragraphs.

The first principle, *transparency*, was originally intended by Barnett and Parry to inspect the evaluation methods used for quality assurance. For them, transparency represented a link between setting criteria and determining what measurements then to pursue for each criterion. Those engaged in quality assurance sought clarity on the requirements for quality

assurance. In the academic literature, the notion of transparency also elicited other interpretations that related to visibility and university responsiveness when administering quality assurance.

The second principle, *partnerships*, expressed the importance of a collaborative approach to educational practices. Although the focus on consultations between governing bodies and the institutions they regulate was the original intent in Barnett and Parry's study, the academic literature displayed an expanded understanding of partnerships that included associations with other interest groups, such as students, parents, alumni, employers, corporations, and the public at large. Partnerships also evoked models of interdependencies. Examples of how a collective or community of caring could re-imagine quality assurance was also discussed.

Barnett and Parry employed their third guiding principle, *justice*, to highlight opportunities for institutions to adequately portray themselves. This review of the academic literature extended discussions related to justice to how quality assurance practices address concerns for social justice. Singh (2011) asserted "a concern for social justice is usually not part of consumerized notions of accountability which underpin many of the policy reform templates" (p. 488). Other authors also advocated for the insertion of social justice considerations in quality assurance and argued against an over-reliance on economic agendas for higher education.

The fourth principle, *appropriateness*, considered if quality assurance processes were suitable for the assessment of university programs. In their study of quality assurance in the UK, Barnett and Parry attempted to balance the government's desire to create quality assurance protocols with the demands from the education community for more appropriate types of

evaluation methods. It identified a tension between public policy and academic endeavours. The impact of appraising academic quality with the processes currently in place was examined in this study.

The fifth principle, *rigour*, considered what robust processes were used to evaluate quality. The academic literature discussed how administrative efforts and copious amounts of data were accepted as rigour. Ball (2015) stated that in our efforts to comply with quality assurance processes “we become transparent but empty, unrecognizable to ourselves in a life enabled by and lived against measurement” (p. 259). Several authors contended quantifying educational experiences was a misguided aim of quality assurance.

The sixth principle, *ethics*, was added to apply an ethical lens to this study. Moral obligations of universities and the importance of ethical leadership were highlighted. It is argued that an ethical perspective can create space to envision potential new approaches to conceiving quality. The ways an ethical approach to quality assurance intersected with some of the other principles was also explored. The following sub-sections offer a more fulsome discussion of the principles and relevant academic literature.

Transparency. For Barnett and Parry’s (2014) evaluation of a national quality assessment process in the UK, it was difficult for key stakeholders engaged in quality assurance to articulate the meaning of quality and it was often conflated with ‘excellence’. It was shown that as each group operated under their own definitions, this created barriers to achieving agreement on a common approach to quality assurance. Other authors acknowledged the fluid nature of discursive practice and how different viewpoints of what outcomes should be achieved often competed for validation. Various stakeholders defined quality in different ways. Furthermore, Harvey and Green (1993) identified another complexity to defining quality when

they wrote “this is not a different perspective on the same thing but different perspectives on different things with the same label” (p. 10). The ambiguity apparent in the discourses made it challenging to present a stable picture of quality assurance.

The fluidity of discourse was what Foucault (1972) described when he wrote:

the statement, as it emerges in its materiality, appears with a status, enters various networks and various fields of use, is subjected to transferences or modifications, is integrated into operations and strategies in which its identity is maintained or effaced” (p. 118).

Niesche and Gowlett (2015) contended that it was imperative for educational leaders to recognize they operated in environments of multiple subjectivities. Following Foucault’s views on discourse, these studies suggested choices were made based on contextual power struggles and demonstrated socially shaped notions of quality. On the one hand, it could be argued that the changing definition of quality compromised the transparency of quality assurance. On the other hand, it presented an opportunity for educational leaders to be nimble as they served the contexts in which they were situated.

There was a call in the academic literature for quality assurance practices to be more responsive to their settings. Romanowski (2014) contended that cultural contexts were often overlooked in neoliberal educational reforms. Yet, in Ashcroft and Rayner’s (2012) study of quality assurance in Ethiopia, they observed educational leaders selectively adapted quality assurance practices from the UK. They described the definition of quality as “leaky” (p. 20) since policies were only partially transferred to the Ethiopian setting. Some of the features from the original policies were lost or leaked as they travelled to a new country. In this example, a country imported only elements they thought were compatible to their context. Ashcroft and Rayner’s study stood apart from others in the literature as it demonstrated how context-driven policies resisted dominant neoliberalism. This leakiness created greater transparency as the

selectivity of policy makers made decisions with their context in mind. This study gives hope that a modified quality assurance framework may also be possible elsewhere.

Other scholars discussed transparency of quality assurance practices in terms of visibility (Anderson, 2006; Strathern, 2000). Universities were required to be more visibly accountable to governments and this justified public policies that instigated quality assurance in higher education. However, Strathern argued that quality assurance as a technology of visibility led to the presentation of large amounts of information, which resulted in less comprehension. Extensive amounts of data cluttered documents and diluted one's understanding of what was occurring at an institution; thus, achieving the opposite effect by decreasing transparency.

Partnerships. The relationship between governments and universities was considered a key partnership. The two sides ideally should collaborate in formulating quality assurance processes; thus, both parties would see their interests served. However, studies revealed a more authoritative unidirectional flow of policy from government to universities (Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Moller, 2009; Srikanthan & Dalrymple (2003). Jackson's (1998) partnership in trust conceptual framework proposed preserving regulatory authority yet fostering a climate of mutual trust between governments and institutions. He recommended that once institutions demonstrated a reliable institutional quality assurance process, governing bodies would grant institutions the freedom to self-regulate. This suggested reviews could be less intensive periodic check-in points.

While some studies described governments and their working relationship with universities, others expanded the principle of partnerships to include other stakeholder groups. A stakeholder approach found in the literature was usually associated with the expectation that universities were held accountable to multiple parties (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Becket &

Brookes, 2008; Bogue, 1998; Heap, 2013; Law, 2010; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Shanahan & Jones, 2007). In Cheng's (2011) study on the different ways faculty and students defined quality, the conclusion was that both students and instructors viewed themselves as key partners in education. Similarly, Kristofferson and Lindeberg (2004) asserted that students, alumni and employers were all "end users of quality assurance" (p. 34). The academic literature described an approach to quality assurance that was inclusive of the perspectives of various parties interested in higher education; however, no mention was made regarding administrative support staff. They were omitted as a stakeholder group.

The literature also discussed how the discourses for quality assurance not only described the notion of partnerships, but also transformed the way universities operate. Ball (2012) claimed "partnerships are a mechanism, powerful but relatively unobtrusive, for discursive insinuation, for the insertion of language, concepts, practices and subjectivities from the private sector into the public" (p. 24). Furthermore, Elliott (2012) explained that universities in need of funds turned to corporate partnerships and these external stakeholders created discourses of performativity that subsequently shaped institutional priorities. The shift from internal governance to externally-framed reporting requirements altered how universities conducted themselves. This was particularly evident in Ball's (2012) description of off-shore university satellite campuses. As institutions sought new ways to generate revenue, they branched out to joint ventures with private educational services from other countries. These for-profit relationships placed a heavier accent on contractual obligations than educational goals, which diluted the social aims of universities.

Another way of conceptualizing partnership was also apparent in the literature. In this instance, the interdependencies of different constituents brought ethical considerations to the

forefront. Bogue (1998) proposed a community of caring framework for quality assurance which focused on ethical student development. Dill and Beerkens (2013) described quality assurance as a collective action. Additionally, Weaver-Hightower (2008) favoured an ecology metaphor to understanding policy. These examples of a nuanced approach to partnerships that emphasized an interconnected network shed new light on potential quality assurance frameworks that need not adhere to an economic framing of higher education.

Justice. In the review of the academic literature, this principle of justice extended beyond Barnett and Parry's initial idea of an institution's ability to accurately depict themselves in quality assurance processes. Wilson-Strydom (2015) described "debates of justice and fairness are common in the field of university access or participation, and so this provides a useful focus point for a discussion of theories of social justice in relation to higher education more broadly" (p. 144). Coinciding with increased enrolment and rising costs, quality assurance practices were often presented as a mechanism to support broader priorities at universities.

A consistent theme related to quality assurance was that of framing of education in economic terms, which consequently preserve existing disadvantages of certain segments of the population. Several scholars argued neoliberal principles applied to education perpetuated a form of social Darwinism (Apple, 2001; Gillies, 2008; Rottmann, 2007; Ryan, 2012). When Abbas and McLean (2007) used a critical discourse analysis for comparing two universities in the UK, they found that quality assurance practices reinforced social hierarchies. Despite similar programmatic offerings, public perception and quality assurance discourses continued to uphold differences in reputation between the two institutions. Similarly, Singh (2011) reported that universities reproduced stratification according to wealth and class. In her study of

quality assurance in South Africa, the government's mandate to widen enrolment at universities did not translate into increased representation of members from disenfranchised segments of the population into lucrative professions. Gillies (2008) came to the same conclusion with his textual analysis of policy texts in UK over a nine-year timespan. He wrote:

The focus on quality, therefore, may result in a form of introversion where equality becomes limited simply to standards of provision and systemic consistency, and the wider, significant impact of socio-economic inequalities on educational outcomes is not addressed (p. 693).

Rather than the free market model as a self-resolving system for issues of injustices, mechanisms of governance such as quality assurance reinforced social inequities (Apple, 2001; Brown, 2015; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Rottmann, 2007).

Several studies discussed the insertion of a social justice leadership perspective to quality assurance which would create an awareness of those being served or excluded by existing procedures (Berkovich, 2014; Blackmore, 2009; Furman, 2012; Singh, 2011). Berkovich (2014) wrote "the moral justification for social justice efforts in education is that the promotion of marginalized individuals benefits the school in the short term and society in the long term" (p. 285). This challenged the neoliberal premise that focused on immediate benefits to the individual. A social justice perspective encouraged a critical reflection on socialized oppressive patterns embedded in institutional processes like quality assurance (Bell, 1997; Kincheloe, 1999). Abbas and McLean (2007) argued "if quality procedures are to play a role in challenging global inequality, a starting point is to reveal biases in our current understanding of quality" (p. 726). These authors urged educational leaders to apply an ethical lens to their work, challenge their assumptions, and recognize their moral responsibilities.

Appropriateness. What emerged in the academic literature was that a technique originally intended to control for mechanical errors in the production of material objects was

not appropriate for assessing quality in higher education. Several studies contended that a fundamental dissonance existed between an on-going narrative characteristic of education and an outcomes-based measurement model represented in neoliberal quality assurance practices (Apple, 2001; Ball, 2012; Elliott, 2012; Esyutina, Fearon, & Leatherbarrow, 2013; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004; Webster, 2015). Quality assurance processes were criticized for confining academic experiences to structured survey responses captured in a single moment in time as confirmation that learning had occurred. Critics of quality assurance practices in education challenged the standardized approach and questioned the appropriateness of the current approach to measuring the dynamic and participatory nature of educational experiences (Ball, 2012; Esyutina, Fearon, & Leatherbarrow, 2013; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Page, 1995; Webster, 2015). Ball (2012) claimed “increasingly, as we adapt ourselves to the challenges of reporting and recording our practice, social structures and social relations are replaced by informational structures” (p. 19). The application of a strategy originally developed in the manufacturing sector was deemed inappropriate for higher education where quantifying something as intangible and transformative as education simply cannot be fully achieved.

Studies also showed policymakers and educational practitioners were mostly at odds with each other and argued there was a misalignment between the current approach to quality assurance and the nature of educational endeavours (Clegg & Smith, 2010; Law, 2010; Reid, 2009). In Reid’s (2009) paper discussing the formation of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), for instance, he noted the neoliberal framing of education transformed universities into businesses. Quality assurance procedures favoured uniformity in delivering education and there was a total disregard for contextual factors. The mismatch between standardized quality assurance processes and the dynamic nature of educational efforts was

repeatedly questioned in the existing research literature. Despite concerns raised in the academic literature, educational leaders have yet to be successful in deterring neoliberal governance mechanisms, such as quality assurance processes. They continue to reinforce and be subjected to accountability demands.

Rigour. Another contentious theme in the academic literature addressed the rigour of the quality assurance processes. It was assumed that a set of robust procedures would assuring academic quality was sought in credible ways. However, more often than not, researchers found the end purposes were not clearly articulated and thus, it suggested it would be difficult to gauge what quality assessment methods should be used. Stensaker, Langfeldt, Harvey, Huisman, and Westerheijden (2011) reported findings from their study of quality assurance in Norway where unclear aims for quality assurance contributed to blurred lines drawn between processes and goals. Interestingly, Gibbs and Iacovidou (2004) refuted the need for measurements and, thus, rejected any discussion on the rigour of assessment tools in its entirety. They argued that calibrations of an intangible entity, such as quality, was irresponsible and created a “pedagogy of confinement” (p. 113) which ultimately led to misplaced educational efforts that hindered human potential.

Another criticism of quality assurance was that rigour, compliance, and quality were often entwined (Cabalin, 2015; Harvey & Green, 1993; Law, 2010), which further confounded whether quality was indeed being achieved. The optics of auditing academic quality became indistinguishable from the actual evidence of quality. Dill (1999) wrote:

There is a danger that a focus on conforming to external assessments may encourage a ‘culture of compliance’ in which the production of high quality documents, policies, and procedures substitutes for the development and dissemination of new knowledge designed to improve the core processes of teaching and learning” (p. 134).

Reid's (2009) investigation of quality assurance in Australia concurred with these findings as he observed governing bodies were fixated on procedural compliance. This echoed Anderson's (2006) notion of visibility, which was discussed earlier in this chapter under the principle of transparency.

In the academic literature, there were others who argued against simple compliance to quality assurance practices. Romanowski (2014) challenged the neoliberal ideology and its purported positive impact:

The key assumption underlying neoliberalism is that free markets are a positive economic element. This may be true in theory, with increased profits providing evidence, but in reality, there are consequences of neoliberalism that are often overlooked. Less discussed are the impact of power and interests and the implications on institutions, cultures and individuals (p. 177).

The resulting form of governance was described by Olssen (1996) as "governing without governing" (p. 340) whereby politicians were able to impose structures and then, remove themselves from any culpability for the outcomes. The activity itself of quality assurance took on the identity of quality as its own and eclipsed more important matters of education.

In the pursuit of satisfying quality assurance requirements, universities found themselves undertaking a considerable administrative burden (Anderson, 2006; Bogue, 1998; Browne & Rayner, 2015; Dill & Beerkens, 2012; Rowlands, 2012). Dill and Beerkens (2012) found program reviews were labour intensive that required significant amounts of time and human resources. While this administrative heft provided the optics of rigour and made accountability activities visible to others, it also detracted from the core idea of academic quality. Anderson (2006) observed quality assurance exercises "imposed an additional workload burden but actually failed to assure quality in any meaningful way" (p.171). According to Rowlands (2012) the performativity involved in quality assurance processes

decreased the resources that would otherwise have been dedicated to improving processes. The cost of the administrative work ironically distracted from attending to the enhancement of the academic experience. In a misguided attempt to demonstrate rigour, educational institutions conflated administrative displays, such as pristine-looking documents and well-planned site visits, with academic quality.

A related aspect of quality assurance in higher education that emerged in the literature was the propensity to favour quantitative metrics (Akdag & Swanson, 2018; Ball, 2012; Bogue, 1998; Chun, 2002). This was described by Akdag and Swanson (2018) as “datafication and quantification” (p. 74). Bogue (1998) and Chun (2002) stated the bias towards quantitative data reflected the facile method of presenting information more than valid evidence of academic quality. Chun (2002) wrote:

Actuarial data is commonly used because of the ease of collection and the patina of scientific objectivity. But this approach equates quality with discrete, available, and, perhaps most significantly, easily measurable indicators of quality, such as counts of people and resources (p. 25).

The use of measurements was viewed as a political act (Apple, 2001; Miller, 2015; Morrissey, 2013). In Anderson’s (2006) interviews with university faculty in Australia, academics shared their observations on the power shift that had occurred in higher education privileging course evaluations as an indicator of the quality of teaching. Gibbs and Iacovidou (2004) discussed quality indicators as a technological orientation and Strathern (2000) identified them as highly selective manifestations of performance. Foucault elaborated coercive governmental practices were legitimized by rationales found in discourse (Lazaroiu, 2013).

Morrissey (2013) asserts “the practices of performance measurement and management...centrally rests upon neoliberal notions of individualization and competitiveness, and are chiefly concerned with defining and framing the parameters of an optimally productive,

performing subject” (pp. 797-798). Thus, the discourse surrounding quality assurance was an example of how neoliberal technologies of government insert themselves into educational practices and how discourses transform members of universities into subjects under a dominant framing. Efficiencies outweigh leadership ethics (Gardiner, 2016) and quality is understood in economic terms (Anderson, 2006). Meanwhile, other variables affecting a university’s ability to improve their delivery of academic programs were neglected. For example, educational practices of critical reflection that would negate the need for external measurements of quality in higher education were overlooked (Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004). According to Goldberg (2006) “Drawing on contexts is a useful way of conceiving of policy as it helps to explain how different contexts offer different material possibilities” (p. 80). Adams and Buetow (2014) argued data was worthless without a contextual understanding. These scholars asserted quantitative measures represented blunt instruments that could portray over-simplified representations of institutions and context was needed to translate measurements into meaningful data points. Contemporary discourse favoured a standardized practice to quality assurance that led to incomplete and biased portrayals of educational institutions, whereas, alternative discourses could accommodate varied scenarios, be responsive to where institutions were situated, and address the local obstacles.

Another perspective presented in the academic literature related to rigour was that rankings demonstrated a relative notion of academic quality (Harvey & Green, 1993) and tended to favour large, comprehensive, science-based, and English-language universities (Cramer & Page, 2007; Marginson & van der Wende, 2007; Page, 1995). The metrics used were insufficient estimates of quality as aggregate ratings artificially rank-ordered institutions, which were more alike than empirically different (Cramer & Page, 2007; Page, 1995; Page,

Cramer, & Page, 2010). The assigned scores did not represent statistically significant differences and tended to yield low correlations between indices and the final rankings. For-profit publications were designed to increase sales and showed little regard for contextual factors, such as student demographics, university missions, and specific geographical locations. Despite criticisms from academics that rankings represented a reductionist approach, they were considered credible by the general public audiences (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007). With neither a firm foundational knowledge of statistical analyses nor a deep understanding of the complexities that were inherent to universities, the general public relied on the simplicity of rankings to form their comprehension of academic quality.

There was one study that stood out in the literature for not opposing a neoliberal approach to higher education. Contrary to other articles written about quality assurance practices, Dill and Beerkens (2013) did not take issue with the dominant managerial discourse in higher education. For them, the neoliberal ideology provided prospective students with value-added consumer intelligence. The focus on improving quality assurance processes that best motivated a robust organizational culture of quality was promoted. In their view, the rigour of quality assurance methods would be enhanced with intensified measurements and, in turn, this would expand the spread of quality culture.

Ethics. Numerous authors in the academic literature claimed quality assurance mechanisms usurped ethical considerations for economic ones. Formal quality assurance systems that have emerged, such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and accreditations have rationalized measurement at the expense of a moral imperative (Bogue, 1998). Ciulla (1995) argued that ethics should persist as the core of leadership and should nurture new forms of dialogue between researchers and practitioners. Scholars contended the restricted perspectives

embedded currently in processes of quality assurance posed threats to academic freedom (Brown, 2015; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004) and autonomy could be achieved with an ethics outlook (Ciulla, 1995; Langlois & Lapointe, 2014). Foucault (2000) claimed that “ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (p. 284). Thus, academic freedom and autonomy would be enabled through a reflexive ethical approach to leadership.

Dennis (2016) was particularly vocal on the disappearing ethics in education. She wrote “the managerial college leader is one who is exhausted by the delivery of parochial institutional interests rather than the bearer of ethical values” (p. 124). Educational leaders have an ethical responsibility to reconcile the gap between mechanisms of governance and educational goals.

Elliott (2015) asserted:

The essence of ethical leadership goes further than an expression of values and beliefs of the leaders themselves – it extends to an institutional ethical direction and purpose, and the working through of this in terms of principles, procedures, and actions that govern, shape, regulate, and guide transactions, especially with external bodies, collaborators, and partners (p. 310).

The constraints imposed by quality assurance processes on educational leaders have prevented them from achieving goals of social justice (Brown, 2015) and addressing other important ethical questions, such as what knowledge should be most valued (Kincheloe, 1999; Romanowski, 2014). These scholars called for educational leaders to confront the constraints of quality assurance practices.

Some studies described ethical educational leaders engaged in moral action (Berkovich, 2013; Sergiovanni, 2005) and concerned with issues of justice (Northouse, 2016). Thus, these educational leaders were better poised to collaborate with different stakeholder groups (Elliott, 2015; Langlois & Lapointe, 2014). Moreover, organizations built on strong relationships created ethical environments that enabled those from marginalized groups to express

themselves (Gardiner, 2017) and allowed educational leaders to confront ethical dilemmas they encountered while meeting institutional expectations (Gardiner, 2015). Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort was conceptualized as "a collectivized engagement in learning to see differently" (p. 176). In these perspectives of educational leadership, ethics was based on challenging oneself to understand different viewpoints and act in more inclusive ways. Rabinow and Rose (2003) speak of Foucault's notion of governmentality as it relates to ethical theory where one asks oneself questions regarding who should be governed and to what ends. Researchers advocated for educational leaders to make a departure from competence-based managerialism and adopt an approach that would be more critical and aligned with ethical principles. Students, educators, and educational leaders were called to the task to understand how their ways of seeing the world were shaped by dominant discourses.

To combat the adverse effects of quality management, Goldberg (2006) suggested a counter-discourse for higher education. As an alternative discourse, the framing of universities as an educational eco-system could regard institutional activities more holistically. Raven (2005) advocated for educational leaders "to study the 'effectiveness' (judged in terms of their long-term social and ecological effects) ...and invent better ways of doing things" (p. 35). Weaver-Hightower (2008) also recommended a policy ecology metaphor. Furthermore, Berkovich (2013) formed a socio-ecological perspective predicated on liberal democratic and critical humanism ideologies.

To subvert a neoliberal basis for quality assurance, new frameworks would need to be developed. Fallon and Paquette's (2014) symbiosynergetic educational paradigm suggested a new framework that could potentially be applied to quality assurance. As researchers of First Nations education, they opposed the dominant educational discourses that they deemed were

both exclusionary and a form of internal colonialism. Although intended for First Nations, Fallon and Paquette's opposition of a Euro-centric approach to evaluating student performance in favour of a more culturally-affirming and communal way of educating students resonated with other scholars in the academic literature and extended to wider educational settings that also resist neoliberal frameworks for quality assurance. Their symbiosynergy-of-heterogeneity model acknowledged the complex network of socio-cultural contextual factors that shape educational endeavours. One could begin to imagine quality assurance as an academic ecosystem whereby teaching and learning would focus on social justice efforts.

Another offering from the academic literature was Furman's (2012) five-dimensional framework for educational leadership, which proposed instilling a more critical approach to quality assurance. Furman's five dimensions – personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological outline practical ways to enact social justice leadership. The personal dimension involved educational practitioners reflecting on their own assumptions and prejudices. The interpersonal dimension focused on forging relationships based on trust and respect with students, teachers, parents and community members. The communal dimension emphasized creating an environment inclusive of various groups. The systemic dimension advocated for confronting systemic barriers. Finally, the ecological dimension approached social justice with an understanding of overlapping contextual factors. This conceptualization of a complex network or eco-system described an interconnected environment in which universities operate.

The next section elaborates on Foucault and his work related to discourse. In the presentation of his work, the linkages to the findings in the academic literature are discussed. Foucault's perspective on discourse and those of other scholars inform this study. The

following section provides the reader with a background on what led to this study and how the data was analyzed.

Foucault

This section explores some of Foucault's views on discourse as the basis of this research. This study applied a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist lens to interrogating university quality assurance discourse. Foucault (1972) contended "the enunciative function reveals the statement as a specific and paradoxical object, but also one of those objects that men [and women] produce, manipulate, use, transform, exchange, combine, decompose and recompose, and possibly destroy" (p.118). Much of Foucault's work became a critical component of social sciences in 1970s (Saarinen, 2008). In Foucault's (1972) book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he detailed the fugacious nature of discourses. He discussed discourses as situated in historical contexts and, as such, meanings to words were less stable than one may recognize.

From a post-structuralist standpoint, reality is a social construction (Kellner, 2003; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015; Olssen, 2003). Several researchers who wrote on university quality assurance considered Foucault an influential figure who informed their post-structuralist studies (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Ball, 2015; Cahill, 2015; Dixon, 2013; Mohammed, Peter, Gastaldo, & Howell, 2015; Olssen 2003). Dixon (2013) claimed "understanding how meaning is derived is central to the work of Foucault; he was interested in revealing the arbitrary and contemporaneous nature of social and historical practices" (p. 580). The "multi-vocal" (Dixon, 2013, p. 579) or "polyphonic voices" (Angermuller, 2014, p. 4) found in studies using a post-structuralist discourse analysis aligned with Foucault's ideas of fluidity in discourse. With a Foucault-informed post-structuralist 'looking glass', this research

approached quality assurance whereby meanings of quality could be formulated in multiple ways.

Discursive games of power. Foucault's (2000) games of power described hegemonic power was promulgated through discourses. He wrote "When I say 'game', I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced" (p. 297). He explained truth was a social construction derived from power-infused discursive practices. Foucault described conceptualizations of truth were situational and functioned to regulate society. According to Foucault (1978), power struggles were embedded in discourses such that "power has to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize" (p. 144). He described the game played in discourse was to uphold dominant schools of thought, suppress alternative constructions, and use prose to institutionalize behaviours. For instance, sexuality was described by Foucault (1978) as:

Through the themes of health, progeny, race, the future of the species, the vitality of the social body, power spoke of sexuality and to sexuality; the latter was not a mark or a symbol, it was an object and a target...Power delineated it, aroused it, and employed it as the proliferating meaning that had always to be taken control of again lest it escape; it was *an effect with a meaning-value* (pp. 147-148).

In much the same way, our bodies and sexuality are controlled through the socialization of behaviour, academic quality is framed in certain manners to suit particular political agendas. Several other researchers analyzed the politicized nature of educational policy discourses and used Foucault's work to inform their studies (Angermuller, 2014; Bacchi, 2000; Dixon, 2013; Fairclough, 2013; Marttila, 2010; Talib & Fitzgerald, 2016). Apple's (2011) account of changes in educational policies over the last two decades demonstrated how discourses mythologized the past as a way to justify greater regulation on education. Also, Goldberg's (2006) study recognized discourses were influential in the acceptance of a new policy. Barbieri's (2015) case study in Spain discussed the politics of problem definition. Clegg and Smith's (2010)

ethnographic study of revising a strategy document for a university in the UK found discourses framed problems in specific ways. Bacchi (2000) described discursive practice as “the non-innocence of how ‘problems’ get framed within policy proposals” (p. 50). Privilege granted voice to some constituents while others were silenced (Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). These studies demonstrated Foucault’s views on discursive practices that they are used to perpetuate “reigning conceptual grids” (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. 3).

Repetition in discourses was also shown as a technique to naturalize an ideological perspective, which, in turn, created a sense of inevitable progression to current practices. For example, Cabalin’s (2015) critical-political discourse analysis in Chile found educational policies reinforced the cultural dominance of neoliberal ideological beliefs. Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) argued their Foucauldian-informed critical analysis helped to understand the different constructions of reality created by those in power. Once we are conscious of how our own ideas have been socially shaped, we are able to undertake emancipatory actions (Dixon, 2013; Jacobs, 2014). What these readings had in common was their depiction of politically-motivated discourses, which actively shaped perceptions.

Foucault and quality assurance discourse. Rabinow and Rose (2003) wrote “the belief that our psyche and our desires lie at the very heart of our existence as experiencing human creatures now turned out to be, not a foundational point that can ground and justify our demands for emancipation, but the fulcrum of a more profound subjectification” (p. 3). When applied to quality assurance, those who have oversight of and those who engage in administrative processes at universities shape and are shaped by the conceptualizations of quality in the discourse. Several studies in the academic literature discussed quality assurance discourse as an expression of and engagement in political activities (Brady & Bates, 2015;

Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004; Saarinen, 2008). In Barnett and Parry's (2014) analysis of the national quality assessment process in the UK, they identified an "antagonistic ideological context" (p. 78). In their study, academics and government agencies lobbied for prominence of their views. Salter and Tapper's (2000) outline of the history quality assurance in the UK drew conclusions that quality assurance afforded power to some and away from others. Filippakou (2011) wrote "quality regimes in higher education, one might say, influence the ways in which the meaning of higher education is interpreted and perhaps defined, by limiting other interested parties' power to influence" (Filippakou, 2011, p. 17). Quality assurance processes were developed by regulatory bodies to serve economic goals more than enhance educational programs (Brady & Bates, 2016; Law, 2010; Reid, 2009; Webster, 2015). This exploratory case study at one Ontario institution utilized a Foucauldian-informed approach to examine ideological choices made in quality assurance discourses.

Chapter Summary

This chapter reviewed the academic literature on quality assurance in higher education. A preliminary review of the academic literature provided a foundation for approaching the two research questions for this study: 1) How do quality assurance texts at one Ontario university describe academic quality? and 2) How is quality understood by key stakeholders, namely university faculty administrators who have responsibilities related to the institutional quality assurance process at the chosen Ontario university? In the academic literature, the main conceptualizations of quality were predicated on neoliberal ideology. The quality of a university education was described as the provision of either a service or a product. In the academic literature, definitions of quality in economic terms were found to be problematic and failed to address the transformative nature of education which cannot be captured entirely by

absolute measures. Present-day quality assurance processes were discussed as naturalized expressions of a neoliberal market-based logic applied to higher education at the expense of a moral imperative. Alternative frameworks found in the literature suggested new ways to frame quality and quality assurance. In later chapters, these alternatives are discussed further alongside the findings for this study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Ramirez (2014) claims “language serves as an ideal entry point to analyse the power struggles inserted in quality practices” (p. 128). This chapter describes the chosen methodology that was employed to investigate the following two research questions: 1) How do quality assurance texts at one Ontario university describe academic quality? and 2) How is quality understood by key stakeholders, namely university faculty administrators who have responsibilities related to the institutional quality assurance process at the chosen Ontario university? The selection of printed materials, recruitment of participants, and research ethical board requirements are detailed. The chapter ends with a synopsis of the strengths and limitations of the study. Before delving into features of the chosen methodology, the next section first discusses what considerations were made when designing this study.

Research Considerations

Quantitative versus qualitative. Research pursuits are often categorized as quantitative or qualitative and sometimes they are also described as mixed methods (a combination of the two approaches). Quantitative studies are known for the collection of numerical data (Mills & Gay, 2016). In contrast, qualitative research methods gather data from exploratory studies (Gross, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, & Francis, 2015; Iacovidou, Gibbs, & Zopiatis, 2009) that seek a deep understanding of how people make sense of their world (Boddy, 2016; Yazan, 2015). Qualitative approach to research is often open-ended and reflexive (Adams & Buetow, 2014) and supports social, ethical and moral matters (Birch, Miller, & Mauthner, 2012; Denzin, 2010; Hathaway, 1995). To this end, the research adopted a qualitative approach to report non-numerical data, delve deeply into the meaning of quality,

and challenge current ideas of quality assurance in ways that could not be possible through a quantitative study.

The case of studying one institutional quality assurance process. The research examined how quality was presented and explained based on printed materials and interviews with participants at one particular setting – a large, comprehensive university in Ontario. A case study, that is a distinct real-life phenomenon bounded by time and space (Johnston, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Gay, 2016; Patton, 2015) was the chosen methodology to provide an up-close account of an institutional quality assurance process. Although case studies can be used in quantitative or qualitative (Shareia, 2016), this research aligned with the latter approach. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described qualitative case studies as “the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher is as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (p. 37). This case study captured a quality assurance process while in progress at one department. Data was collected over a four-month period and observations of the review included the tone and tenor of department as people engaged in the process. The decision was made to pursue an exploratory case study methodology using a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis, which would investigate multiple possibilities for defining quality.

The researcher’s ontological viewpoint. Ontological assumptions regarding the nature of reality underpin methodological decisions in research (Tuli, 2010). While this research consisted of some elements popularized by Robert K. Yin’s (2014) postpositivist model for case study research, such as triangulation of data and member checking, it was a post-structuralist perspective that guided this study. This aligned more with another proponent of case study research, Sharan Merriam, who argued against a single observable reality (Merriam

& Tisdell, 2016; Yazan, 2015). In the quest to understand what influences may shape definitions of quality, the researcher applied a post-structuralist lens to the research. As Mohammed, Peter, Gastaldo, and Howell (2015) contend “case study is a valuable methodological approach in poststructural research because it facilitates a deeper understanding of the social, political, and historical circumstances that shape a phenomenon and how power relations shape the actions and perceptions of people” (p. 99). Through a post-structuralist ontological view, power dynamics were investigated in the discourses for quality assurance.

Critical discourse analysis versus post-structuralist discourse analysis. It was expected that the meanings of quality, as expressed in quality assurance discourses, would not be clearly defined or easily discernible. This would match findings in the existing academic literature. To delve into the presentations of quality, a discourse analysis was used as an analytical framework. However, it should be noted that there were two prominent types of discourse analysis described in the literature that often were conflated – a critical discourse analysis and a post-structuralist discourse analysis. While both were influenced by Foucault’s ideas on discourse, power, and knowledge (Dixon, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tuli, 2010; Yanow, 2011), they differed in how they each adapted his ideas to fit a specific ontology (Fairclough, 2013). It was Fairclough (2013) who delineated the distinction between critical discourse analysis, based in critical realism that aimed to locate a singular truth, and post-structuralist discourse analysis, which supported a post-structuralist perspective and accepted the co-existence of multiple meanings (Akdag & Swanson, 2018; Brady & Bates 2016; Denzin, 2010; Gewirtz, Dickson, & Powers, 2004; Graham, 2011; Niesche & Gowlett, 2015; Romanowski, 2014). Figure 2 was created as a visual representation to illustrate how critical

discourse analysis and post-structuralist discourse analysis overlap in their shared interest in Foucault's work as well as diverge on their ontological perspectives.

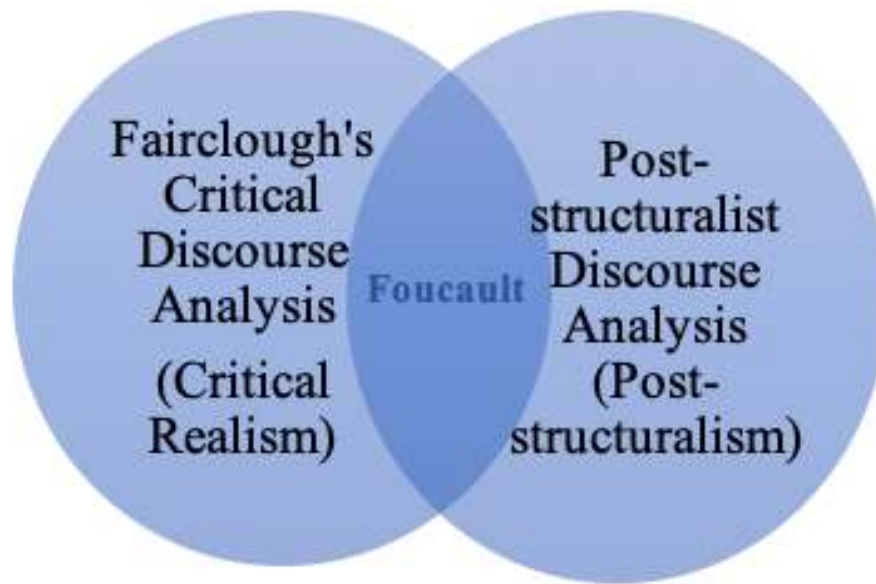


Figure 2. A visual of Critical Discourse Analysis and Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis

In this study, a post-structuralist discourse analysis was selected to deconstruct quality assurance discourses.

This section discussed the choices that influenced the decision to pursue a qualitative approach to the research. An exploratory case study methodology using a post-structuralist discourse analysis was identified. As well, the researcher's ontological viewpoint was explained. Before providing information pertaining to research ethical board requirements, what data sources were used, and the strengths and limitations associated with the selected methodology, the next section describes how Foucault's work as well as a 2014 study conducted by Barnett and Parry in the UK influenced this research.

My Looking Glass and Road Map

A view of discourse as social practice (Brady & Bates, 2015; Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004; Saarinen, 2008) influenced how to approach the data that was collected for this study. As described by Graham (2011) “Words on a page, utterances, symbols and signs, statements: *these* are the start and end point for the poststructuralist discourse analyst” (p. 4). A post-structuralist discourse analysis was employed for deconstructing the quality assurance discourses found in the data collected for this exploratory case study of one Ontario university.

Foucault’s recognition of power biases embedded in discourse. Foucault’s views on discourse as social practice resist succumbing to discursive framing of one perspective as indelible and inevitable. Vighi and Feldner (2007) wrote “The concept of discourse is arguably Michel Foucault’s best-received contribution to the humanities and social sciences...Foucauldian discourse analyses are at home in practically all fields of critical inquiry” (p. 141). In accordance with Foucault’s (1978) definition of ideology as a larger system of oppression, a Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis exposes how ideology expressed in our social discourses props up and self-promulgates itself.

To lead critically and ethically, it is beholden on educational leaders to resist the tendency to resign oneself to naturalized ideology and to consider leadership as a series of acts of agency that actively engage with the power dynamics that are embedded in discursive practice. Anderson and Mungal (2015) stated “If we think about discourses in a Foucauldian sense, then discourse analysis provides a philosophical method for analyzing leadership as a disciplinary practice that is constituted through discourses” (p. 815). The decision to employ a post-structuralist discourse analysis stemmed not only from an interest in how an abstract

concept, like quality, lends itself to be socially constructed, but also how exposing the social practice of defining quality can encourage educational leaders to reflect on their work.

This exploratory case study with its embedded Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis used Foucault's views on political power that engenders discourse as the basis for this investigation. Vighi and Feldner (2007) recognize his contributions to new methodological approaches:

What Foucault's discourse analyses achieved, however, was a thorough denaturalization and dereification of entrenched notions of the social. Foucault historicized concepts which were thought to have no history, such as objectivity and truth; he de-idealized scientific thought by revealing its intrinsic materiality; and he relativized culture-specific norms and values which were more often than not considered universally valid (pp. 151-152).

It was also his notion of technologies of government (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) that framed this inquiry. The assumption that quality assurance processes were ideologically neutral was challenged and the taken-for-granted meanings of quality were probed with Foucault's works related to discourse, knowledge, and power, in mind.

Barnett and Parry's guiding principles. Another influence that gave shape to this research was a 2014 study conducted by Barnett and Parry, who were originally hired during the 1990s by the Higher Education Funding Councils for England Wales to review their national quality assurance policies. The two researchers developed five principles as an analytical framework to guide their policy analysis study. Their five original principles were:

- Transparency
- Partnerships
- Justice
- Appropriateness
- Quality and Rigour

Their principles have been repurposed for this exploratory case study of quality assurance in Ontario. The principles go beyond analytical framework and are applied to the review of the interviews and the structure of the interviews. Within the interviews, participants were granted the freedom and flexibility to interpret these principles as they so wished. The last of the five original principles was renamed to simply ‘Rigour’. A sixth principle ‘Ethics’ was added to address the ethical goals of higher education that may be overlooked. Tuana (2014) states “ethical leadership, in the sense of *putting ethics in the foreground of all* activities, is essential for the entire educational community” (p. 153). Her recommendation to ensure the overall well-being of the educational community was considered when examining the data for this exploratory case study and contemplating potential new frameworks for quality assurance. These six guiding principles provided an initial analytical framework to approach the research topic. The remaining portion of this chapter focuses on the particulars of what texts were chosen, how participants were recruited for the interviews, and what were details of the research ethics board requirements.

Research Ethics

In addition to reviewing resource materials and observing one department’s experiences as they underwent their quality assurance process, data was collected from semi-structured interviews with key university stakeholders. Research ethics policies safeguard human participants in research. In keeping with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Government of Canada, 2014), applications were prepared and submitted to two different institutional REBs.

Research ethics boards. The first REB application was submitted to the University of Western Ontario, where the doctoral program is offered. The second REB approval was

required for the Ontario university that was the site for the case study. Both REB submissions included the letter of information and consent form, email script, interview guide, and thank you letter template, which can be found as appendices to this dissertation. Informed consent, anonymity of the data, participants' familiarity with the researcher, and member checking for the interview transcripts were ethical considerations related to this study.

Recruiting participants. A purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015) was drawn from those employed as faculty administrators at the chosen Ontario university for this exploratory case study. That is, a criterion-based approach to recruiting participants was exercised. Faculty administrators who had recent experiences with the institution's quality assurance process were approached to participate in this study. The participants (n =12) had exposure to the institutional (and possibly other) quality assurance processes. These experiences were deemed relevant and important as they enabled participants to engage in the interviews with a firm understanding of quality assurance. As the research focused on the notion of quality in the context of university quality assurance processes, participants in the study needed a pre-existing familiarity with these practices. This familiarity allowed for informed reflections and responses. Others, whose work would not have involved engagement with quality assurance processes, were excluded from the study as it was anticipated that they would have needed to be educated on quality assurance processes (i.e. what they are, when they occur, what purposes are served, what are the required components, etc.). Their responses would likely be less substantive and they may feel less comfortable formulating their responses to the interview questions.

Participants were faculty administrators from six different departments at the university, spanning three academic divisions (health sciences, humanities, and applied science). This

contributed to an examination of the research topic from various disciplinary perspectives. The majority of participants held positions as Program Directors or Coordinators (n=8), while the remaining participants were Associate Deans, Vice Deans or Deans (n=4). There was a close gender balance amongst the participants (7 females, 5 males), which countered suggestions that the findings were biased towards one gender over the other. The diversity of disciplines, levels of positions within the organization, and gender added a well-roundedness to the perspectives that were included in this study.

Table 3. *Summary of the positions held by participants in the study*

Position	# of Participants
Dean, Associate Deans, Vice Deans	4
Director or Coordinator	8

The email addresses for participants were obtained from the institutional employee directory posted on the university’s publicly available website. The university’s website was also a source of information to identify which departments had either recently completed or were in progress of finishing their quality assurance review. Faculty administrators, whose departments were listed on the university schedule for academic program reviews, were targeted. Prospective participants received a recruitment email message accompanied with a letter of information and consent form. All participants were requested to respond to the email to confirm their agreement to participate in the study. Initially, eight individuals within the department where the researcher was employed were contacted. Six agreed to participate, resulting in a 75% response rate for this first group. Outreach to other faculties at the chosen university involved emails to 40 additional people. Six more agreed to be interviewed, resulting in a 15% response rate. Overall, there was a 25% response rate for this study. Correspondence was sent from and received by the designated Western University student email address. This

allowed for a separation between the email addresses for the researcher as a doctoral student and the researcher as an employee at the chosen institution. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained from participants at the time of recruitment as well as at the start of each interview (written consent at the start of each interview). Consent to use de-identified quotes was also requested. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, the Ontario university where the study occurred has not been named in this dissertation.

Member checking. Member checking was employed in this study. The process involved sending participants a copy of their interview transcripts and requesting they confirm the accuracy of the recording. Participants were advised at the end of their interviews that they would have this opportunity to review their interview transcripts. The transcripts were typed in MS Office Word software and sent via email to participants. Member checking allowed participants to correct any of their statements. Participants had two weeks to convey any corrections or changes. After the two-week timeframe, if no changes were received from participants, it was assumed that the participants accepted the original transcription of their statements. Participants were invited to follow the study to its end and were offered a copy of a summary of key findings for the study, which would be sent to them at the conclusion of the researcher's doctoral program.

Potential risks and benefits. The researcher held a full-time continuing administrative staff position at the university selected for this exploratory case study. To mitigate any potential risk of individuals experiencing some pressure to participate in the study, emphasis on the voluntary nature of the study was articulated in the recruitment email. Any pre-existing relationships were acknowledged and participants were asked to be reflexively aware of their relationship with the researcher when deciding if they would participate in the study. The

power dynamic was inverted in that faculty administrators who were approached to participate in the study likely considered themselves higher in the organizational hierarchy than the doctoral student who was conducting the research. There was low or no risk of faculty feeling coerced by the researcher to participate in the study. The topic to be discussed i.e. quality in the context of quality assurance also did not pose any risks that would harm participants in potentially physical or emotional ways. There were no known or anticipated risks associated with participating in this study.

There were no direct monetary benefits for participating in the study. However, the very act of participating in an interview and responding to questions related to quality may have positively affected participants with regards to a deeper reflection on this administrative process. Participants may have found the interviews intellectually stimulating and this may have encouraged them to further reflect on the meaning of quality as it relates to the university's quality assurance process more deeply than had the interviews not occurred. Participants otherwise may not have pursued such reflection on their own accord. Potentially, this study may have changed how participants viewed the quality assurance process and may have altered their contributions to subsequent discussions related to academic quality.

Confidentiality and data security. It was communicated during the recruitment and data collection stages that participation was voluntary and responses would be de-identified for anonymity. An interview schedule with names of participants, email addresses, the dates of their interviews, and assigned participant numbers was created as an anonymization log. Another record with the assigned participant number and pseudonym for the participant was created and stored separately. Interview transcripts were saved as a series of documents that were identified only by the assigned participant numbers. The interview transcripts and the list

of assigned participant numbers were stored on one encrypted USB key, while the anonymization log was kept on another encrypted USB key.

An audio recorder and a voice transcription software were used during the interviews. Participants were given the option to decline the use of the voice transcription software; however, participants could not participate in the study if they did not wish to have their interviews audio recorded. All participants agreed to both the audio recorder and voice transcription software for their interviews. No descriptive, socio-demographic data were collected. Voice transcriptions were temporarily stored in Google Docs until the completion of each interview. Immediately following the interview, the interview transcription was saved to an encrypted USB key and stored in a locked cabinet in the doctoral student's private office. The doctoral student was the only person who had access to this office and the office door was locked when not in use.

Interview transcripts only indicated the assigned participant number (i.e. INT12). If the results of the study were to be published, participants were told their names and titles would be omitted and replaced with pseudonyms. To protect the identities of the participants, transcripts were redacted to remove any identifiers of the participant, such as the name of their department or academic programs along with the names of specific professional associations, committees, or groups that could potentially result in another person recognizing the participants. To further safeguard the identities of the participants, the name of the Ontario university and its quality assurance process acronym was removed from all documentation. Identifiable information was not available to others. All data collected during this study were kept confidential. In keeping with REB standards, the data will be kept for five years and then expunged.

The role of the researcher. Brooks and Normore (2015) emphasize the importance of the researcher to “think carefully about whether they are making sense of what they observe from an etic (outsider) or emic (insider) perspective” (p. 801). The emic/insider stance presented in this study offered an abundance of insight through uniquely intimate details. However, the opportunity to observe first-hand a department undergoing their quality assurance process also came with the risk of being too close to the data. The researcher acted as a co-creator of the reality (Creswell, 2014) and possessed the power to interpret the data. Gillies and Alldred (2012) note “we should acknowledge that we researchers produce, rather than retrieve them [interview transcripts] shell-like from the seabed” (p. 153). The personalized nature of data collection and interpretation inherent in conducting research, especially when the study occurs at one’s own workplace, presented risks of the researcher seeing what she wanted to see. A researcher’s deliberate decision to influence the outcome of the study was recognized as an ethical consideration. The offer to share a summary of the findings with the participants of the study held the researcher accountable in reporting the data accurately.

Another advantage related to the researcher’s close proximity to the study was that the researcher had a firm understanding of the quality assurance process and thus, did not require further instruction or information on the procedures and components. The field observations offered the reader an in-depth understanding of the process that occurred. The details of the mixed responses to the exercise and the tension between duty and intrusion were intended to draw the reader near to the experience and have a fulsome appreciation of what was involved in enacting the quality assurance process. To create a portrayal of the quality assurance activities without embellishments, the researcher needed to have a heightened awareness how personal impressions could lead to attaching greater value to some responses over others. Ekman (2014)

described the “precarious negotiation of distance and proximity” (p. 122). Self-examination was necessary for addressing subjectivities (Zeni, 1998) as researchers analyze and report their data. It is important to recognize I was interpreting my surroundings, occurrences, and most significantly, my post-structuralist approach to my study.

To mitigate some of the compromising effects that may have resulted due to the researcher’s close involvement in the quality assurance process at the department that was the case for the research, data from participants from other departments at the university were included in this study. Another strategy to reduce subjective influences was to work with the de-identified data as much as possible and refer to the anonymization log only when necessary, such as when adding a new entry. By working with de-identified data, the researcher immersed herself in data without considering certain impressions to particular people.

Data Collection

In correspondence with case study research, this exploratory case study gathered data from multiple sources of information to compose a comprehensive picture of a social phenomenon (Hathaway, 1995; Mills & Gay, 2016). Yin (2014) describes “the case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence – documents, artifacts, interviews, and observations” (p. 12). This exploratory case study included a collection of documents, observations, and interviews to provide the data for an in-depth analysis (Brooks & Normore, 2015; Merriam, 1989; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). Data from these multiple sources were triangulated to add to the study’s trustworthiness. Denzin (2010) described the qualitative investigator as a “researcher-as-bricoleur” (p. 421). Like bricolage, which is the art of creating from diverse materials, this case study constructed a picture of an institutional quality assurance process with data from a variety of sources (quality assurance

texts, semi-structured interviews, field observations, and ongoing engagement with the academic literature).

The texts. Textual analysis is a common feature of qualitative studies (Bowen, 2009; Shareia, 2016). The university and the Quality Council for Ontario websites contained numerous resource materials accessible to the public. The materials that were analyzed for this study included the university's guide for its quality assurance process, workshop presentation slides, quality assurance templates, and Ontario's *Quality Assurance Framework and Quality Assurance Guide*.

The interviews. In addition to relevant quality assurance texts, a total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interviews allowed for more diverse perspectives on the institutional quality assurance process. Faculty administrators from six different departments (2 humanities, 3 health sciences, 1 applied science) who were contributors to their departments' submissions of quality assurance materials were interviewed. The interviews were conducted over a period of three months (October to December) in 2017. During the recruitment process and at the start of the interviews, participants were advised their participation was voluntary. Even if they consented to participate, participants were informed they possessed the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. No participants withdrew from the study.

All interviews occurred face-to-face at locations convenient for the participants. The duration of the interviews ranged from 35 minutes to 65 minutes in a single sitting. The locations selected were the administrative offices for faculty administrators. No interviews occurred off campus. The structure of the interviews deliberately moved from general to increasingly pointed questions. The interviews began with a question that asked participants to

describe their administrative roles and how these roles interfaced with quality assurance processes. This was intended to put participants at ease. The initial question involved conveying information about themselves that they knew and could readily provide. Participants were then asked to state their own understandings of quality followed by more specific questions regarding their perceptions of the relevance of six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics). The use of guiding principles provided a structure to the interviews and were used to conceptualize the topic in the interview questions. Participants were permitted to interpret the meanings of the principles as they wanted.

In keeping with Patton (2015)'s assertion that "a qualitative inquiry is a journey of discovery, and that includes learning what deeper questions to ask as the inquiry unfolds" (p. 254), participants were prompted to expand on their responses as the dialogue proceeded in the interviews. The interviews consisted of a combination of questions prepared in advance and impromptu follow up questions to probe further on specific statements made by the participants. The line of questioning was intentionally flexible as participants were encouraged to clarify or elaborate on some of their initial responses. The last question of each interview "Is there anything else you would like to share with me regarding quality assurance in higher education and the notion of quality?" was intended to be open-ended and invited participants to share any closing statements they wished on the topic. For the last question, some participants summarized what was discussed, while others expressed their general feelings regarding quality as it pertained to quality assurance. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were reminded that the information found in the interview transcripts and the final reporting of the results of the study would not be attributed to any individual participant.

The field observations. Notes made during this study formed the field observations in a reflexive diary. While on site, amid the quality assurance process in motion at one department, these field notes and reflections added texture to the study to enrich the understanding of the exercise. What appeared most compelling at different stages in the process were recorded. The sequence of events, the flow of paperwork, the interactions in meetings, the dynamics between individual contributors to the self-study, and the emotions expressed about the process were recorded as field observations. According to Hathaway (1995) “Researchers involve themselves directly in the setting under study in order to appreciate organizational phenomena in light of the context in which they occur and from the participants’ point of view” (p. 548). The field observations were the resulting data from the researcher’s involvement in the setting where the quality assurance process took place.

Data Analysis

Embedded in the exploratory case study was the analysis of document texts and interview transcripts that interrogated and problematized dominant narratives with the intent to understand the term quality. The post-structural discourse analysis involved a review of the text from various data sources, which were re-read several times and hand-coded for recurring key words and concepts. The discourses were analyzed through an iterative process, which entailed reading and coding the data multiple times. The data was analyzed for recurring key words, themes, and concepts. A convergence of evidence from multiple sources gave this study a methodological soundness. The triangulation of the data from the interviews, academic literature, documents, and field notes reinforced emergent themes. This maintained an integrity to the data.

Coding the Data. Coding the data gathered in this exploratory case study were hand-coded and provided the groundwork recognizing themes. First, the data from documents were coded into groups of texts with similar phrasing. Subsequently, these groups were combined to create broader themes. Resource documents included the Ontario's Quality Assurance Framework, the institutional guide for quality assurance, workshop presentation slides, and quality assurance templates. The documents were also inspected for traces of the six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics).

A similar iterative process of reading and coding themes was performed for the analysis of the interview transcripts. Participants' responses to the interview questions were reviewed for coding based on recurring words, phrases and concepts. The responses to the questions regarding the six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics) were closely scrutinized for common or contrasting expressions. The process of coding data was performed in parallel with data collection and interview transcription. Creswell (2014) described "Data analysis in qualitative research will proceed hand-in-hand with other parts of developing the qualitative study, namely, the data collection and the write-up of findings" (p. 195). Some precursory analysis occurred directly following the interviews and throughout the process of transcribing audio recordings of the interviews to immediately retain the nuanced essence of the interviews. After interviews concluded, a few minutes were dedicated to write reflexive notes on any connections that came to mind from the interviews. Additional writing of notes occurred during the transcription process.

Interpreting the Data. Following the coding of the data, the analysis involved a review of the emergent themes. Initially a review of the entire body of text in the materials and interview transcripts in a linear fashion, reading from start to finish. Then, the texts were

segmented and grouped thematically. The materials and interview transcripts were re-read as a non-linear process, focusing on one principle at a time. Each principle offered a new lens to use for deconstructing the meaning of quality and provided a rich, dense, and robust understanding of the discourses. The texts were coded into thematic segments and according to the six guiding principles. The re-configuration of the text segments from themes into guiding principles and back to themes allowed the researcher to become deeply familiar with the data. How Foucault's views on power, discourse, and knowledge were noted in the emergent themes of this study. This followed what Merriam & Tisdell (2016) described as the process of converting "Bits and pieces of information from interviews, observations, or documents...into larger themes as the researcher works from the particular to the general" (p. 17). The data were analyzed and interpreted in a multi-layered approach which involved segmenting and grouping the data multiple times to examine the data in different ways. Text was grouped by principle, then by common speech patterns (i.e. use of same phrasing), and then by themes.

Strengths and limitations

There are strengths and limitations associated with every research project. Patton (2015) notes "Limited resources, limited time, and limits on the human ability to grasp the complete nature of social reality necessitate trade-offs" (p. 256). Qualitative research findings can be highly descriptive, credible, and trustworthy (Starks & Brown, 2007; Tuli, 2010). In the pursuit of an up-close account of a quality assurance process, some trade-offs were inevitably made as is the case for all studies. For instance, findings from a small sample cannot be generalized to the larger population. This next section further elaborates on the strengths and limitations of this exploratory case study.

Small sample size. The participants for this study were faculty administrators (n=12). Given more time and resources, it would have been possible to recruit more participants and extend this study across several institutions. The trade-off associated with expanding the study to a larger pool and having more data would have been not only considerable more time, but also the potential analysis perhaps being less detailed and reflective. In exchange for context-rich descriptions of a quality assurance process at an Ontario university, the small sample size represents experiences set in a one place and time. Ruddin (2006) asserts:

It is a matter of some debate as to whether generalization is an appropriate requirement to demand of case study research in any case. As it essentially a problem of positivism, to take it into consideration may be inimical to the very nature of the case study enterprise (p. 798).

To this point, it may be both unrealistic and inappropriate to be conceive a case study as a weak statistical study. Case studies are misunderstood by proponents of natural science research (Ruddin, 2006). Drobot (2012) contends “good practical research will offer enough information regarding the researcher's personal engagement in the study, about the heuristic process, so that the reader will be capable of appreciating the authenticity of the study and the researcher's integrity” (p. 12). Reflections on what was observed and synthesized with the academic literature offers a deep dive into the research.

What this study was able to describe was an insider/in-depth perspective of a quality assurance process. The researcher was able to access how one department enacted the institutional quality assurance process. Information-rich cases provided in-depth insights (Patton, 2015). The reader was provided with insight on the behind-the-scene activities that are not ordinarily visible to outsiders. Furthermore, this study was highly descriptive drawing from different sources of information. Baxter and Jack (2008) indicate that a “rigorous qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context

using a variety of data sources” (p. 544). In keeping with this view, this exploratory case study gathered evidence from three sources – resource documents, interviews, and field observations. Triangulating results adds a trustworthiness to the findings (Bowen, 2009; Brooks & Normore, 2015). According to Tuli (2010) “Issues of trustworthiness and credibility, as opposed to the positivist criteria of validity, reliability and objectivity, are key considerations in the interpretivist paradigm” (p. 101). On one hand, criticisms of qualitative research such as researcher bias and the inability to generalize to a broader population were voiced in the academic literature (Lucas, 2014). On the other hand, the comprehensiveness of detailing a case was defended as insightful research (Ruddin, 2006). Patton (2015) explains “What would be ‘bias’ in statistical sampling, and therefore a weakness, becomes intended focus in qualitative sampling, and therefore, a strength” (p. 254). The interviews for this study allowed the researcher to capture specific and up-close impressions held by faculty administrators at one Ontario university.

Analytical generalizability and transferability. The very nature of case studies is that they are bounded in specific contexts (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mills & Gay, 2016). While some findings from this qualitative exploratory case study potentially could relate to some of the realities of other institutions, particularly those located in the same province and subject to the same quality assurance framework, the research has limitations to its generalizability to other settings. Studies such as a qualitative approach, seen through a post-structuralist lens, do not adhere to scientific validity, objectivity, or statistical generalizability.

Case studies offer up-close and in-depth research findings that reap analysis to shed light on theoretical concepts that can facilitate the development of working hypotheses (Yin,

2014). In its interrogation of the notion of quality, which quality assurance in higher education has as its focal point, this study problematized the notion of quality. The research intended to capture the effects of taking for granted what quality means. Findings, supported by the research literature, offered potential new places to start a dialogue on quality assurance. The up-close account of an Ontario institution's quality assurance process with an examination of underlying assumptions associated with quality assurance processes in higher education can resonate with other studies and contribute to further research on this topic by setting the stage for possible new frameworks. The interrogation of an abstract concept was a strength of this study since it challenged a notion that often goes unquestioned.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed the methodology used to investigate the research questions regarding how quality is defined in resource documents and in interviews with faculty administrators at a selected university. The outline of the considerations that led to the decision to pursue this research in the first place provided the reader with an understanding how the topic lends itself to a more qualitative approach. This exploratory case study using a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis examined assumptions in discursive practice.

The chapter continued with information related to the submission for two research ethics board reviews. The use of human participants in this study necessitated approval from two institutions. The chapter ended with a discussion on the strengths and limitations of the research. The triangulation of data from different evidentiary sources (quality assurance documents, semi-structured interviews, and field observations) not only supported a detailed description of an institutional process at one university, it also added to the trustworthiness of

the data. While quantitative researchers may question the limits to statistical generalizations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) with an embedded subjective approach and a small sample size, qualitative researchers recognize that interviews allow for information-rich data that is not available through numerical data and large sample sizes.

The findings are detailed in the next chapter with the analysis occurring in the subsequent discussion chapter. The emerging themes form the basis of the discussion chapter, which then leads to the final conclusion chapter for this dissertation.

Chapter 4: Findings

In this chapter, the findings are described based on the data collected from quality assurance resource documents, interviews with faculty administrators, and field notes written while observing one department's experience with its institutional quality assurance process. Using a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis, this exploratory case study addresses two research questions: 1) How do quality assurance texts at one Ontario university describe academic quality? and 2) How is quality understood by key stakeholders, namely university faculty administrators who have responsibilities related to the institutional quality assurance process at the chosen Ontario university? Faculty administrators (n=12) who were engaged in their department's quality assurance processes were recruited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Questions employed six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics) to initiate dialogue and encourage participants to consider different ways of approaching the notion of quality. The discovery of different dimensions to quality are presented in this chapter.

Quality Assurance Resource Documents

The documents studied for this research were made available through publicly-accessible websites. Both the chosen university and the Council of Ontario published online resources, such as a provincial guide for quality assurance and an institutional process manual. The findings from a review of these resource documents featured a tendency to avoid explicit definitions of quality. Rather, the resource materials suggested related factors were regarded as approximations of academic quality. The following section outlines the findings for each document reviewed.

Provincial guide. The examination of documents began with a publication produced by the Council of Ontario Universities (n.d.), *A guide to learning outcomes, degree level expectations and the quality assurance process in Ontario: Ensuring the value of university degrees in Ontario*. This document described a ‘culture of quality’ that would support the province’s new Quality Assurance Framework (QAF):

The intent of Ontario’s quality assurance system is to foster a culture of quality in all university programs across the province. Its use of the arm’s-length expert reviewers and attention to both new and ongoing program review makes Ontario’s QAF one of the strongest quality assurance systems for postsecondary education in the world (p. 13).

Just how Ontario’s quality assurance framework was assessed as one of the strongest in the world was not elaborated. This attractive and glossy government publication gave the impression that its intended use may have been more promotional than informational. It delineated an eight-year cycle for reviews and it also reinforced the arm’s length governance of university quality assurance processes in Ontario. However, the guide lacked specific details on how academic quality was to be defined and subsequently to be assessed. While quality was not explicitly defined, it was closely associated with degree level expectations.

Institutional guide. In the main institutional resource document for the quality assurance process at the chosen institution, an explicit definition of quality was also missing. Two main indicators of excellence – 1) quality of the scholarship and research, and 2) achievement of degree level expectations were named and presumed to exemplify quality. The first indicator judged quality on a comparative basis with peer institutions.



Figure 3. Inferring quality from scholarship and research

The second indicator of quality – the achievement of degree level expectations – was more tenuous in its relation to quality. Like the texts in the provincial guide for quality assurance, it was not apparent to what extent programs would need to meet their degree level expectations and how that would be ascertained. It appeared that through inductive reasoning, degree level expectations would lead to aligned learning outcomes which, in turn, should assure quality.

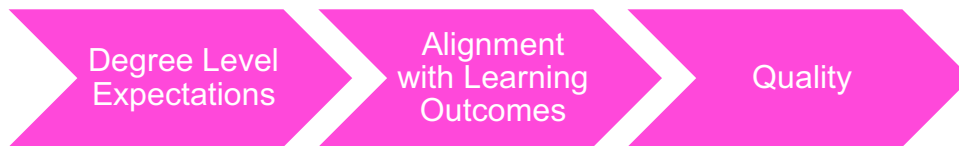


Figure 4. Inferring quality from degree level expectations

It was also implied that an expert review panel would know how to assess a program’s achievement of degree level expectations and would then be able to conclude if the academic program in question possessed quality. In an ‘if-you-build-it-quality-will-come’ approach, the institutional guide inferred that degree level expectations would assure quality.

The institution’s quality assurance document was informed by the provincial guide for quality assurance framework. In both documents, no explicit definition of quality was found. The quality assurance framework produced by the Council of Ontario Universities may have intentionally left the definition of quality ambiguous to provide universities with the freedom to insert their own definitions. If that were the case, this intention was opaque. In the institutional quality assurance resource document, the closest approximations to defining quality were statements pertaining to program structure and faculty research. The institutional resource

guide’s omission of a definition of quality suggested that quality was assumed to be obvious to everyone and therefore, needed no further explanation.

The institutional quality assurance guide stated its commitment “to being an internationally significant research university, with undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs of excellent quality.” The review of the institution’s quality assurance guide found excellence was frequently conflated with quality and the use of various quality indicators were discussed as evidence of both. Quality was excellence and vice versa. Both quality and excellence were presented with the assumption that everyone intuitively understood their meanings and thus, it was unnecessary to elaborate on them. It was expected that external reviewers would be able to make a summative evaluation of quality by noting excellence.



Figure 5. Inferring quality from excellence

Measures, such as student grade point averages, admission grades, graduation rates, faculty qualifications, number of applications, growth in enrollment, rates of employment after graduation, and number of student awards were seen to contribute to both excellence and academic quality. This conflation and the amorphous nature of both created a nebulous causality loop where one propped the other despite both were ill-defined. This circuitous logic whereby quality led to excellence that, in turn, led to quality was used to describe how to proceed in the university quality assurance process.

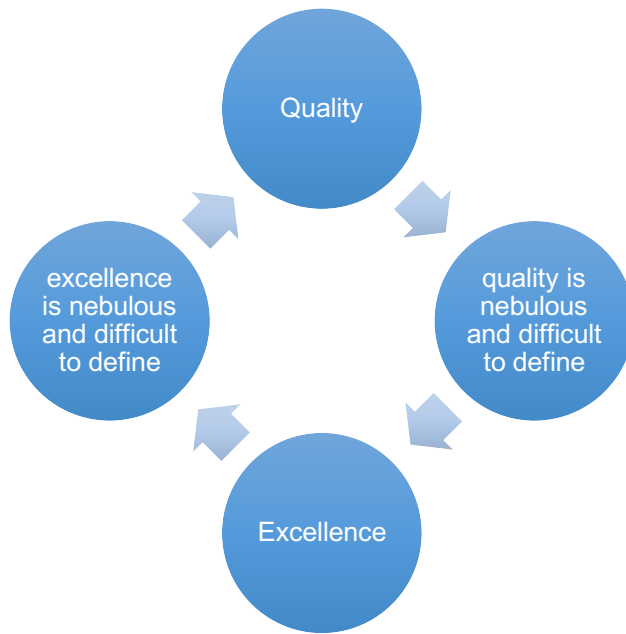


Figure 6. Circuitous causality loop of quality and excellence

In the institutional guide, the use of numerous sources of data was recommended along with broad consultation with multiple stakeholders (e.g. students, faculty, staff, alumni, etc.).



Figure 7. Inferring quality from stakeholder feedback

According to the university’s institutional quality assurance guide, quality assessments were obtained through discussions with different stakeholder groups. Throughout the guide, instructions appeared for departments to confer with others, such as:

The Dean ensures that appropriate consultation is conducted with faculty and students, other university divisions and external institutions...Submissions are invited from teaching and administrative staff, students, alumni and members of the program and/or unit community...The process of preparing a self-study should involve faculty, students and staff...provision must be made for reviewers to meet with faculty, students, administrative staff and senior program administrators as well as members of relevant cognate units as determined by the commissioning officer. In the case of professional

programs, the views of employers and professional associates should be made available to the reviewers.

The institutional guide stated the inclusion of a mix of stakeholders as a requirement for the quality assurance process observed for this exploratory case study.

What appeared most prominently was that these quality assurance documents primarily functioned as procedural guides. The majority of the content was dedicated to step-by-step instructions on how to administer quality assurance. These instructional details replaced any substantive discussion on what qualified as quality. The manual consisted of protocols for approving new degree programs as well as reviewing, modifying, and closing existing programs. Much of the text was dedicated to roles and responsibilities. For instance:

The Quality Council ensures that Ontario continues to maintain a rigorous quality assurance framework. It ratifies each institution's Quality Assurance Process [IQAP] and is responsible for approving any subsequent revisions to that IQAP. It also is responsible for conducting an audit of university processes through a panel of auditors that reports to a committee of the Council. The panel's role is to examine each institution's compliance with its own Quality Assurance Process. The Quality Council approves and monitors the audit reports.

While this information was descriptive of the structures in place for quality assurance, the focus on process deflected from deep contemplation of what constituted quality and what were the end goals that were ultimately being achieved by the exercise.

The quality assurance reviews involved several activities that were intended to be repeated typically every six to eight years. Figure 8 depicts the components of an institutional cyclical program review.



Figure 8. An outline of the components of the institutional quality assurance review

By following the prescribed process for quality assurance, it was implied that universities were demonstrating academic quality. This study interrogated whether the quality assurance process located academic quality or if other objectives were achieved. One of the key documents prepared for enacting quality assurance was the self-study. The next section describes the self-study and how it was used to display quality.

Self-study. The largest component for the institutional quality assurance process was the self-study, which was prepared by the academic departments. A self-study, an inward look at one's own academic department, often began with boilerplate texts related to the university's mission and the department's commitment to excellence. It was expected that a self-study would be thorough and robust in its depiction of the academic programs under review. Although the self-study was an opportunity for the academic leadership to step back and think about possible new directions, it also had the potential to be reduced to nothing more than a display of a department managing their own image.

For the specific academic department observed in this exploratory case study, the self-study provided a narrative describing each of its programs and was accompanied with a deluge of data, including research funding awarded to principal investigators, the proportion of faculty members with prestigious awards, number of licenses or patents attributed to investigators, rankings in externally produced publication, citation counts, number of applicants for admission to the programs, entrance grade point averages, number of registrants, number of graduates, average cumulative grade point averages for enrolled students, results from student satisfaction surveys, summaries of course evaluations, data from post-graduation surveys, number of student fellowships and scholarships, PhD time-to-completion rates, and undergraduate employment rates after graduation. The significant amount of data used to exhibit quality may have achieved the opposite by obscuring the view with an overwhelming amount of information. Arguably, the abundance of data included in the self-study may have created barriers to acquiring an honest depiction of the academic programs.

In addition to the review of quality assurance documents, this exploratory case study included semi-structured interviews with faculty administrators responsible for contributing to their departments quality assurance activities. The next section outlines the findings from these interviews. The discussions from the interviews are organized around the six guiding principles adapted from an earlier study conducted by Barnett and Parry (2014), as discussed previously in the literature review (Chapter 2).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Faculty administrators (n = 12) whose work involved contributing to their department's quality assurance submissions were recruited for this study. To protect the identities of the participants, pseudonyms were created. Participants were given the following pseudonyms:

“Sam”, “Pat”, “Alex”, “Chris”, “Erin”, “Drew”, “Lee”, “Kim”, “Quinn”, “Cal”, “Max”, and “Parker”. The participants were asked to share their definitions of academic quality and to relate their understanding of quality with the six guiding principles. In some instances, they chose not to treat the principles as discreet concepts. Participants intermingled principles in their responses. One principle was interwoven with another, such as transparency and justice or rigour and appropriateness. For example, one of Sam’s responses was “Appropriateness is a partnership” and Parker explained ethics as “There’s an ethical obligation on the part of whatever body is doing the quality assurance to again have this transparency from the beginning.” Max indicated, “Transparency I think then permits rigour” while Erin stated, “Transparency, justice – they’re all ethical principles.” Participants, at different times throughout the interviews, entangled principles as they described them as closely interconnected. Like quality, these guiding principles were vague and imprecise in their meanings.

Similar to the quality assurance resource documents, participants conflated quality and excellence. Comments, such as “My definition of quality would be excellence” (Alex) or “Excellence in teaching and student experience is quality” (Chris) demonstrated that participants had difficulty making distinctions between the two concepts. When asked to be more explicit, participants struggled with finding the right words. Drew explained, “We all use the same words but it really means something completely different to different people in different disciplines.” Quinn noted, “It would take a great deal of thought and work and debate to operationalize it.” Participants offered sweeping statements and clustered concepts into an all-encompassing meaning of quality. Figure 9 offers the clustering of different concepts, which were assumed to mean quality.



Figure 9. A visual depiction of the clustering of concepts associated with quality

The next sections discuss each guiding principle in an attempt to create distinctions between these concepts and de-cluster some of the ideas shared by participants in the interviews.

Transparency. For 10 out of the 12 participants, transparency was an acceptable, relevant, and necessary general principle for guiding quality assurance processes. However, there were varied and, at times, contradictory responses to what transparency meant to participants. For seven of the participants (Parker, Lee, Chris, Max, Sam, Quinn, Alex), transparency was interpreted as understanding expectations and the criteria to satisfy quality assurance requirements. Responses, such as the one provided below, illustrated that clearly defined expectations were needed for participants to demonstrate quality in the context of a quality assurance process:

I think that if we're going to have confidence in the outcomes of these assessments then it needs to be very clear where the criteria come from and how the expected levels of accomplishment are established (Lee)

The sentiments shared in the interviews suggested faculty administrators were uncertain how to satisfy the requirements for quality assurance. Participants indicated they were uncertain, at times, what were the relationships between the data they were asked to provide and academic quality.

When asked if transparency could also involve the release of quality assurance documents, such as the self-study or the reviewers' report, most of the participants indicated caveats to providing full access to the quality assurance documents to a broader community. Participants articulated a reluctance towards wide distribution of documents associated with the quality assurance process and expressed cautionary remarks. When the suggestion was made, several participants argued the contents of the documents could be misconstrued. The following excerpts demonstrated their resistance to sharing quality assurance documents with external stakeholders, and even sometimes, internal stakeholders:

Well, I wouldn't share everything. I would share a summary. I mean I don't...there are things I think the public doesn't have the knowledge that we have in interpreting documents so you have to be thoughtful in what you share, knowing that their knowledge base is not the same as ours. (Cal)

When you look at quality and metrics that are used to determine it, what you run up against is jargon and specific notions of adequacy or not that may require a good deal of effort to master and to put that out there to an uninformed audience, whether it be people within the institution or without. I think can be problematic. (Max)

Thus, participants contended a lack of awareness or ability to properly distill the information warranted a limited distribution of the quality assurance materials. Apart from publishing pass rates for professional exams, the release of quality assurance documents and the findings from the review was met with hesitancy. It was preferred that dissemination of information be left to

the department's discretion. Here, faculty administrators exhibited their power to reveal and conceal as they saw fit. From a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist perspective, the framing of the quality assurance outcomes was an example of how administrators can leverage their power by controlling the flow of information.

In contrast, Quinn considered full disclosure of quality assurance documentation was possible if framed appropriately and supported with accompanying text. Quinn and others (Parker, Sam, Chris, and Alex) argued in order for quality assurance to have a lasting effect on organizations, multiple stakeholders should be aware of the findings of the review to encourage participation in ongoing discussions. Arguably, conversations that engage others beyond the circle of administrative leaders could lead to greater inclusion, more ethical approaches, and dynamic problem-solving dialogue.

Partnerships. A common reaction to the partnership principle was to name students as partners in education. Students were described as integral to the quality of the academic programs. Participants considered students as consumers and their perceptions of their academic experiences as vital information for institutions. Participant responses included “Are we going about our business of educating and developing professionals in a way that is most appropriate for all of the students?” (Quinn) and “Universities should be adapting policies to make sure they're focused on students and student needs” (Kim).

An overall theme of vocational relevance for a university education was expressed by the participants and identified employers as another important partner in higher education.

Some participants expressed how preparing students for the workforce was a priority:

external partners need us to be providing a program that's going to produce the graduates that they need (Parker)

I think the whole part of job availability is part of justice. It's justice to our students. Why would we intake students and take their money if there's nothing at the end of the road for them? (Cal)

It was interesting to hear one participant in the study linked the principle of justice to future employment opportunities for students. The stakeholder-partnership perspective invited employers to give their input on curriculum matters in greater ways than what would have been in the past. This exemplifies an evaluation governance model that is market driven and how quality assurance has become a discursive practice that privileges private interests (Picciotto, 2017). Participants in my study exhibited the perspective of instilling job readiness in students as an appropriate focus for higher education. A university education was often framed as a return on investment not only for students and their future job prospects, but also employers as an additional stakeholder group that perceived students as future workers.

Seven participants touched on the notion of partnership in a broader sense, involving a network of administrative structures, teachers, alumni, the public, and funding agencies:

It shouldn't really be about one part of an institution proving to another part of an institution that they're doing with what they're telling them to do...it should be about how the entire institution works together to achieve what they defined as quality (Chris)

For us to decide as an institution that this is what good education constitutes without coming to those conclusions in partnership with the consumers of our programs – students, employers, etc. would be a pretty narrow definition of quality (Quinn)

Stakeholders were described as key influencers to higher education and their levels of satisfaction were indicators of quality.

A main challenge posed by a stakeholder approach to quality was identified as the determination to what extent all stakeholders should be satisfied. The participants in the study pointed to this aspect of a stakeholder approach. While there was general consensus that different constituents needed to be involved in the quality assurance process, participants in this

exploratory case study raised questions related to who the stakeholders should be and how much impact each stakeholder group should have on academic matters. Participants explained there was ambiguity in how universities would decide who their partners were and how much influence each partner was granted. That is, it was left unaddressed how much weight or ‘share’ each stakeholder should possess. There was no resolution to this issue articulated. From the data collected in the interviews, it was almost a rote response to support a stakeholder approach without resolving how this would be operationalized.

Justice. This was the principle that participants struggled with the most. It was difficult for participants to determine what was meant by justice and how it applied to quality assurance:

I can’t see its particular relevance... Do you ask me am I anti-justice? No, I’m not anti-justice (Pat)

I don’t understand how the concept of justice relates to quality assurance (Parker)

Yes, of course, justice is important. I don’t know if it’s terribly self-evident. I don’t know how helpful it is (Cal)

This principle seemed too far removed from the practicality of completing a quality assurance process. Participants were unable to recognize its place in the process and reconcile how justice might support quality assurance. Their comments meandered and were made as broad-stroke remarks that only grazed on how it might relate to quality. Ironically, the prominence of social justice is apparent in mission statements for most universities. This would lead one to expect the principle featured more in quality assurance responses. However, this was not the case when presented in the interviews.

Participants also described justice in terms of the student experience:

I don’t know if this gets at your idea of justice or not, but another important role of the school whatever it may be is it mustn’t make its clients, its learners miserable (Max)

I think we have to provide a range of different possible ways of being a successful and good student (Drew)

Participants expressed how students experienced their education as an important aspect to evaluating an academic program and therefore, relevant to quality. Additionally, participants touched on notions of diversity and equity:

We have to you know look at people who have come from marginalized groups for instance. What is their experience of either working here, going to school here (Erin)

Things like diversity of faculty or diversity of students or diversity of curriculum to meet the needs of diverse people, if those questions aren't inherent in the process then perhaps they're missing because there's a justice lens that is missing and I would think that's important to investigate (Chris)

The efforts to increase diversity in the student and faculty population were cited as moves towards greater justice and yet, these were measures that were largely omitted from the self-study for the quality assurance process examined for this exploratory case study. If justice was indeed intended to play a central role in higher education, it failed to be profiled in the quality assurance process.

Appropriateness. Interestingly, participants suggested that the appropriateness of quality assurance for higher education may not have rested on consistent processes but had more to do with relevance to an institution's context and a responsiveness to a particular field.

Responses included:

appropriateness of program content, program delivery processes, program structures, program outcomes (Quinn)

Is the metric we are using an appropriate metric for what we're trying to measure? Is how we're using the metric appropriate? Is there consistency over time as opposed to consistency between programs? (Kim)

If aims varied, then determinations of academic quality could also be diverse. This suggested a departure from a standard approach to quality assurance. Rather than a uniform method for

assuring quality, some participants suggested more program-specific approaches to quality assurance.

The appropriate selection of external reviewers was also discussed. While some of the participants were proponents of reviewers possessing the knowledge of the Canadian context, others suggested an international perspective was more important. The differing responses were:

If you had solely Canadian reviewers, I don't think it would add to the process. I think it would be a waste of time actually. You need those international perspectives (Parker)

there's a balance I think between having sufficient familiarity to assess the organization or the program within the context of its existence versus being so close that their decision would ultimately impact their own organization (Lee)

It's usually several reviewers so that there's a breadth and a different lens that they might approach the review with (Cal)

Most notable was the assertion from one participant (Drew) that more prestigious institutions were less interested in the opinions of external reviewers who may come from less prominent universities and thus, their perspectives would not resonate with the programs under review. This gave the impression that departments could decide whether or not they would attend to the recommendations from external reviewers as it could be argued their evaluations were made out of context.

Rigour. For some participants, it was important to demonstrate to reviewers that the curriculum was thorough and organized around certain themes or outcomes. The use of degree level expectations and professionally-based competencies were used to structure programs, which were then used to demonstrate academic quality. Kim and Alex highlighted how curriculum maps identified redundancies or gaps in their teaching. However, most participants when asked the question interpreted this principle as it related to data collection:

Rigour means how well you collect your data to assess your quality (Sam)

How do you provide the right amount of information or what kind of information can we provide to help them? (Chris)

Rigour was construed also as providing sufficient information to the reviewers so that they may be able to correctly evaluate the department.

Some participants indicated that those engaged in the quality assurance process needed to participate with rigorous intentions:

I think if it isn't rigorous, then it's not worth doing. So if it's not taken seriously and conducted in a sufficiently well-documented and rigorous manner, then it's kind of a waste of time (Lee)

I think there is benefit in doing the best we can to make the process rigorous so that we can't [pause] so that nobody can fudge things and we are reasonably confident that the ultimate picture that emerges from that QA process is balanced, is evidence-based, is complete as it can be. There is no point in engaging in a slack, haphazard QA process. At best, you're going to end up with not terribly useful information and at worst you could end up with misleading information. (Quinn)

It seems to me that there is a risk with what we have, which is that it isn't very, very rigorous. That it is kind of chummy and that the comments are rather bland (Drew)

Participants considered rigour as the foundation of an effective quality assurance process.

Participants for the most part discussed that the quality assurance processes they conducted were rigorous.

However, that said, there were complaints from participants that they were rushed during their sessions when the reviewers visited:

Within the timeframe there wasn't a lot of time to kind of say well actually we think you've missed a few important things that we want to discuss or that we want to highlight and/or hone in on (Chris)

I think there should be more dialogue sometimes during the visit (Cal)

Despite comments that criticized how site visits were conducted, most agreed they would likely organize the visits the same way if they had to do it again. Time constraints only permitted the reviewers to have a glimpse of the department but there was little will to change in part due to the expense of hosting external reviewers and the limits to how much time could be dedicated to the experience. Participants expressed their satisfaction with a ‘good enough’ level of rigour, which many accepted was sufficient for evaluating quality.

One of the downfalls of the current quality assurance process identified by participants in this study was the tendency for organizations to return to their routines and perform in ways most familiar to them:

Quality assurance processes may not really be getting at the everyday experience of those people who live, work and go to school in them (Erin)

It kind of disappears for seven years (Alex)

It’s a crazy spike of activity every eight years (Max).

The intermittent pattern of quality assurance often obscured the actual activity of the departments. In between cycles, participants described little thought was given to continuously gathering and consulting data that were included in the quality assurance review. When granted the opportunity to access quality assurance documents, it appeared that most people chose not to refer to these materials. Participants expressed their doubts that their colleagues would ever read the lengthy self-study document. Below are a few examples of participants who questioned the lasting impact of their arduous efforts:

So we put all these things together and the university looks at it and our reviewers look at it and then come to some conclusions. But what do we really do with it and do about it? (Alex)

it would be really nice if it all became quite culturalized by us all and people knew that you know, when we’re collecting data (Sam)

We have conversations making those kind of changes and then everybody gets busy with the day-to-day and then the next review comes around and we end up doing similar things (Chris)

Their comments suggested that the administrative exercise failed to be integrated into the organization's every day operations. A lack of engagement of the broader community signaled a culture of compliance and underscored a lost opportunity to foster community, collaboration, and interdependencies.

Ethics. Like the principle of justice, participants appeared to struggle to make connections with ethics and academic quality. They also defended themselves from potential egregious perceptions. Alex responded, "I mean I don't think I would intentionally do anything unethical." Chris suggested a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist perspective when she shared:

I think we have to, given that things are constructed, there's going to be multiple definitions but there needs to be something and maybe that's where ethics comes in, there needs to be a process by which we're ensuring that within that diversity we're holding to a core of what we believe to be important and true about this.

Meanwhile, Lee discussed ethics in terms of how individuals approached the quality assurance process and the preparation of their materials:

I think in a certain sense the whole process rests on an assumption of ethical behavior by the individuals that are directing the self-study that are drafting and editing the reports that come out of the self-study, to assure the results of the self-study are presented accurately.

Other participants applied the principle to how participants and reviewers conducted themselves:

They have an ethical obligation to only make those decisions on the basis of the data they have from the process and not from anything else (Parker)

Anonymity of responses, confidentiality, ensuring people are equally empowered to speak and have (Kim)

Because participants found the discussion on ethics difficult to connect to quality, very little was said about this principle. Instead, participants changed the subject and related their comments to other principles, such as rigour and transparency, that they were more comfortable deliberating.

Field Observations

In this section, I share my own observations from my experiences as a scholar practitioner for this study. I participated in an institutional quality assurance process at the department where I was employed at the time of this study. My field notes recorded my reflections while working to support a divisional quality assurance process. I recorded the in-the-moment feelings and connections people made to their everyday work at the university and the quality assurance process. I kept track of my own questions that emerged during the interviews. It was also noted in my field observations when participants struggled with the questions posed to them. Their long pauses and quizzical looks were indicators that some principles were not as easy to comprehend as others. These non-verbal cues would not have been depicted in the typed transcripts but were recorded in my reflective field notes.

Emotional climate. Most of the observations occurred during the production of the self-study report and throughout the site visit. During those times, it was observed that stress levels rose and tensions mounted between individuals who were responsible for the production of the self-study and the organization of the site visit. There was an emotional climate that was captured through field observations that could not be gleaned from interview transcripts or textual analysis of resource documents. The stress level in the office environment intensified as the deadline to submit the self-study and the arrival date of the external reviewers approached.

It should be noted there was an apparent assumption on the part of the institution that administrative resources were available to enact the quality assurance process. Support staff and faculty administrators were expected to meet the demands of quality assurance processes while keeping up with their usual day-to-day responsibilities. The tasks needed to prepare for cyclical program reviews were overwhelming and interfered with one's ability to perform his/her regular duties. This additional workload contributed to a general negative mood in the department that involved strained interactions between those engaged in the quality assurance process and others who were not directly involved in the preparations. It was almost jarring to see some exchanges between different groups. Casual remarks came across as insensitive to the plight of those who were under a considerable amount of pressure to meet the requirements of the quality assurance process. The faculty administrators and support staff operated in a bubble of their own in which work was intensely stressful as they scrambled to complete the added demands of the quality assurance process in a tight turnaround.

There was a lack of expertise in quality assurance on the part of faculty administrators engaged in quality assurance, which added to people's anxieties and perhaps one could argue compromised the process as a whole. Due to the time lapse between cycles for quality assurance activities which can span several years, faculty administrators understandably may have only participated in one or two full quality assurance reviews in their professional careers unless they held multiple terms or moved through several administrative roles. With the exception of two participants who were in roles dedicated to evaluation and quality assurance procedures, all other participants were faculty administrators with limited exposure to quality assurance processes. The six to eight year cycle of quality assurance reviews prevented a person from having extensive knowledge of the process. While some participants expressed a

general understanding of the purpose of a quality assurance exercise, the limited exposure to quality assurance reviews resulted in a lack of expertise and thus, a vague sense of what was expected of them to satisfy the requirements of the quality assurance process. This was exacerbated by the fact that little or no preliminary discussion occurred regarding what defines academic quality for participants when they began to engage in the quality assurance process.

Demonstrating quality through administrative efforts. Without a clear understanding of what constituted quality and in the absence of expertise in enacting quality assurance, participants appeared to take a leap of faith as they threw themselves into the quality assurance process. Some participants decided to err on the side of too much data rather than risk appearing incompetent. They adopted what I would describe as a misguided scattershot or wide-net-catch-all approach to demonstrating quality through administrative efforts. One participant (Chris) described “we just kind of just gave a whole bunch of stuff... providing a bunch of indicators that are sort of reviewed by external experts and then given some recommendations that may or may not be relevant”. The uncertainty of what was expected resulted in a tendency to overcompensate with an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach to data and descriptions. The value of this extensive administrative review was questioned by one participant (Erin) who commented:

Well, I thought it was such a big paper exercise. I mean months and months and months of collecting paper to [pause] for all of these indicators, some of the indicators honestly, I didn't even know what they meant but we wrote and we wrote. It would produce more paper and more paper. We literally had boxes of paper.

Through my own observations, I saw faculty administrators were challenged to know how to distill large amounts of data that they perhaps had not seen before or did not regularly use.

Reporting was described as similar to walking in the dark and the resulting self-study report

spanned various topics in the hopes that within the lengthy document, they had covered what was expected.

Impact of unrelated aspects. My field notes also included observations that described how the text submissions initially appeared and how the final document came together in the end. The content contributions of multiple faculty administrators resulted in disjointed sections of the self-study document appearing in a variety of formats and writing styles. Administrative support staff were tasked to produce a final document that was cohesive and the narrative style was consistent throughout the document. The formatting of the self-study involved tedious copy-editing and formatting (e.g. Did we name the policy or the office correctly? Do we present numbers in their numerical or textual form? Do we capitalize the first letter of each word when we say “Teaching Stream”? Do we give position titles and office names in the same manner each time they are mentioned? Is the font the same type and size on every page? Do the tables, figures, headings, and subheadings follow the same format? Are the headings coded in the table of contents? Have we bookmarked the PDF?). It was important to the faculty administrators that a polished document was produced. Here I saw what I considered the confluence of the abilities of administrative staff to perform these tasks with the department’s ability to demonstrate academic quality. I observed an odd pairing of the quality of the self-study with academic quality. The pristine appearance of the self-study and subsequently the smooth-running site visit were intended to impress the reviewers which exhibited quality although unrelated to academic quality.

Stalled advocacy. Although the academic literature pointed to a need to change quality assurance in higher education, there has been very little change to the way quality assurance is structured. As described twenty years ago by Bogue (1998) “Program reviews feature self-

study and external peer review at the discipline, department, or program level” (p. 10). Today we see that process intact. The model of a self-study and site visit made by external reviewers continues as the standard approach. For the observed quality assurance process, the self-study was posted on a secure website for internal stakeholders, such as students, staff, and faculty, to review and provide feedback. Likely the large investment of time to read several hundreds of pages was a major deterrent as few claimed to have read the document and only a small number of people gave their comments. The lack of input was another indication of low interest and distance from the process. Both the indifference and detachment were also evident in the dialogue that took place during the semi-structured interviews.

The participants sometimes contradicted themselves by on the one hand, complaining that their efforts were all for naught and on the other hand, stating there was value in the exercise. Participants thought there might be a better way of doing quality assurance and yet at the same time could not think of ways to change the process. During the interviews, the principle of transparency evoked responses regarding the administrative strain placed on the academic department. Participants found the synthesizing of large amounts of data and producing a dense self-study report while carrying on with their regular duties a considerable administrative burden. Lee pondered “whether it could be achieved with a sort of less bureaucratic framework would be worth exploring.” The drain on administrative resources was also noted by other participants (Erin, Parker, and Quinn). They thought the upheaval they experienced as they produced the materials for the quality assurance process was at times overwhelming and unnecessary.

However, their discontent with the administrative demands did not inspire recommendations for another way of assuring academic quality. Surprisingly, participants in

my study expressed support for the quality assurance process. When participants were asked what alterations they would make to the quality assurance process if given the opportunity, they generally chose to support the current model. Comments, such as “it’s important to have fresh eyes and external eyes and expert eyes on things” (Chris) and “it’s a learning exercise for the organization that’s being reviewed and that you are looking for guidance” (Parker) posed a strange juxtaposition where disinterest in altering the architecture of the process and low motivation to read the extensive self-study were evident.

Although participants stated support for quality assurance practices, they also discussed their colleagues would “roll their eyes about it and look upon it as just a hurdle to be leapt over and a process to be survived” (Max) or state “I’m glad I’m not part of this process this time” (Erin). From my own observations, there were individuals and groups at the university who had a lack of regard for the quality assurance process or saw the entire exercise simply as a formality. Those closely involved were relieved when portions of the process were completed and those not affected were uninterested in the information gathered. One participant (Alex) shared that despite her encouragements for others in the department to read the self-study, so few did. Rather, they gave excuses why they could not spare the time. Alex described:

I keep saying “Have you read it?” to people around. “Oh, I’m going to” ... “Well what should I read” someone asked. And I said, “All of it actually”. Just skim over it, look at the charts – how many students applied, how many students came, how we’re using the Writing Centre, for instance. I just have a curious mind and I was trying to encourage faculty. I said you know you only get a glimpse every 7 years. I tell you, use it. I think they don’t see value in the process and I guess I don’t understand that.

Questions on how to increase engagement were raised along with an acknowledgement that copious amounts of data and lengthy reports acted as barriers for broadening participation in quality assurance processes.

Chapter Summary

The quality assurance discourses examined for this exploratory case study were organized in this chapter according to the six chosen guiding principles. Definitions of quality were sought in relation to the transparency, partnership, justice, appropriateness, rigour, and ethics of quality assurance processes. While the six guiding principles were deemed important elements to quality assurance, the difficulty in exacting how these principles were enacted shone light on a process that relies heavily on tacit meanings. Despite the limitation to this study as discussed earlier, the findings provided valuable insight and highlighted the disconnect between the intention and the administration of quality assurance.

This chapter presented the findings from the quality assurance resource documents, field notes, and semi-structured interviews conducted with faculty administrators at one Ontario university. Here, I endeavoured to demonstrate the different dimensions of an institutional quality assurance process. For some, quality was defined as favourable rankings for institutional scholarship and research outputs. For others, quality was the alignment with degree learning expectations. Quality was defined as excellence measured by performance indicators or satisfaction surveys. Despite a plurality in meanings for quality, an over-arching ideological theme emerged. This theme is discussed in the next chapter where I analyze the texts further and consider more deeply how the findings collate with the academic literature. From a review of the literature and an analysis of the discourse, I will continue to use a post-structuralist view of multiple realities and demonstrate which different frameworks could be operationalized for alternative approaches to quality assurance.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this exploratory case study was to delve into the meaning of quality as it related to university quality assurance. Using the case of an institutional quality assurance process at one Ontario university as the launching pad for further discussions, this study analyzed explanations of quality revealed in resource documents and by research participants. A Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist perspective supported an understanding of quality as a social construct. Although at a micro level competing viewpoints of quality may have jostled for attention, it became clear at a more macro level that one ideological perspective dominated the discourses used to describe and conceive quality for higher education. With a post-structuralist discourse analysis enhanced by a Foucauldian lens, this research illuminated the fluidity of discourses and showed that the meaning of quality continued to be politicized. That is, descriptions of quality reflected a neoliberal agenda. Eventually, the initial analytical framework of six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics) faded into the background as a focus on emergent themes became more compelling. Thematic threads wove together to form a cogent neoliberal picture of quality assurance at one Ontario university.

The broader themes of quality and quality assurance are discussed in this chapter. Each research question is considered with the trends in quality assurance discourses found at the one Ontario university where this exploratory case study took place. This study argues that there is unrealized potential to develop alternative frameworks for quality assurance. If educational leaders equip themselves with an awareness that beneath the surface of a seemingly mundane and benign process, like quality assurance, lies power-infused assumptions, then they are able

to confront and disarm current practices that are ineffective and incongruent to higher education.

Research Question #1

The first of two research questions asked, ‘How do quality assurance texts at one Ontario university describe academic quality?’ To address this question, the written texts found within institutional resource materials and provincial quality assurance documents were analyzed. Curiously, it appeared that institutions were required to assure something that was not explicitly defined for them. Without a clear and definitive answer to what constituted quality, educational leaders were tasked to prepare their department’s response to the institutional quality assurance process with only a tacit understanding of quality.

The quality assurance texts alluded to quality in various ways, such as international rankings, profession-related exam results, employability of graduates, and external stakeholder feedback. Together these measures were characteristic of a consumer orientation applied to academic quality, no matter how narrow, superficial, and, arbitrary they may be. It became apparent to me that these appraisals of quality failed to capture the multifaceted nature of the academic experience. Instead, they legitimized a neoliberal definition of quality and applied pressure on universities to cater to student satisfaction levels. The findings from the Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis of the texts were consistent with the academic literature. Discourses that initially appeared as varied responses to defining quality came together as a telling sign of neoliberalism at play. The proceeding discussion outlines the themes that support the current approach to quality assurance in higher education and argues they thwart social justice aims. Neoliberal themes of consumerism, competition, quantification, and vocational relevance are discussed in the following sections.

Quality defined by competition. The first theme of competition framed determinations of quality on the basis of how well an institution fared relative to another. In the materials analyzed for this exploratory case study, including a provincial policy publication and an institutional guide for the university's quality assurance process, quality was inferred to mean outshining others. While an explicit definition of quality was missing from the documents, the institutional quality assurance guide advised departments to include "assessments of the programs relative to the best of their kind offered in Canada, North America and internationally". The relative data in the form of externally published rankings from national and international surveys were considered important determinants of academic quality. Assessments of quality, predicated on external rankings, placed academic quality firmly in the context of a competitive environment.

The contemporary conceptualization of universities depicts institutions competing for world-class status (Elassy, 2015; Rameriz, 2014). According to Foucault and Senellart (2011), "Pure competition, which is the essence of the market, can only appear if it is produced, and if it is produced by an active governmentality" (p. 121). The notion of competition produced by ruling structures corresponds to Foucault's (2000) earlier ideas regarding technologies of government. Quality assurance in higher education, thus, is the manifestation of governmental force (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Becket & Brookes, 2008; Cheng, 2011; Heap, 2013; Hoecht, 2006; Morrissey, 2013; Srikanthan & Dalrymple, 2003). Politicians, policy makers, educational leaders, and others implicated in quality assurance create current discourses for quality assurance that uphold neoliberal ideas and do not capture the full measure of a university education. I argue that one of the current failures of today's universities is that when subjected to a natural marketplace competition, they neglect social justice goals.

The contextual aspects inherent to universities and their academic endeavours are negated by universal standards. Educational leaders need to resist the current trend to quantify the intangible essence of higher education through blunt measures of efficiency and vocational relevance.

Quality defined within a consumer orientation. The findings from the quality assurance texts displayed ideologically-infused discourses that constructed a socialized acceptance of a commercialization of academic experiences. Programs were evaluated on how well they met student expectations. In the quality assurance documents, academic administrators were encouraged to use student satisfaction survey results as statements of quality. As well, there were several instances in the provincial quality assurance framework document that advised universities to report student satisfaction data from evaluations of teaching and national surveys, such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) and the Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS). These findings demonstrated Foucault and Senellart's (2011) description of a "complete superimposition of market mechanisms, indexed to competition, and governmental policy" (p. 121). The marketization of a university education was evident in the framing of students as consumers of higher education. Thus, student satisfaction levels acted as measures of quality.

However, there are concerns in the academic literature that student satisfaction rates do not necessarily translate into evidence of learning (Bogue, 1998) or indicate quality in teaching (Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016). Some studies show that when transformative learning experiences are reconstituted into superficial monetary transactions, students adopt an instrumental view towards academics and their scholastic achievement (Cheng, 2011; Law, 2010; Williams, 2016) and there is less concern for the collective (Blackmore, 2013; Rottmann,

2007). Despite the adverse effects of a market approach applied to higher education, quality assurance practices prevail. The findings for this case study support objections to the neoliberalization of higher education in that social justice and ethics were difficult to locate and articulate. A counter-discourse that offers a departure from the neoliberal approach to quality could highlight the negative impact of current quality assurance practices and re-frame how we appreciate and appraise a university education.

Quality defined in quantifiable terms. Another way to support a marketplace competition between institutions was seen in the over-simplification of the complexities of university academic programs. The use of uncomplicated numerical data was encouraged. The findings for this exploratory study included repeated statements in the quality assurance resource documents which normalized the use of quantitative institutional metrics. Within the resource documents examined for this study, there were multiple instances where quantifiable performance indicators were claimed to display academic quality. The discourses in the printed materials included several examples of data points, such as applications, enrolment numbers, admission grades, budget breakdowns, attrition rates, class sizes, proportions of courses taught by permanent or contract faculty, student grades, faculty qualifications, research funding, students' time-to-completion rates, and scholarships. These measures were accepted as evidence of quality.

The assumption that academic quality can only be assured through numbers and statistics is an example of the neoliberalization of higher education and speaks to Foucault's (1978) description of "the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life" (p. 140). These measures of quality reflect the reigning neoliberal ideology that focuses on productivity for universities. Ball (2012) describes:

In regimes of performativity experience is nothing, productivity is everything. Last year's efforts are benchmarks for improvement – more publications, more research grants, more students. We must keep up; strive to achieve the new and very diverse targets which we set for ourselves in appraisal meetings; confess and confront our weaknesses; undertake appropriate and value-enhancing professional development; and take up opportunities for making ourselves more productive (p. 19).

With the proliferation of quantifiable indicators of quality in higher education, attention is given to common standards of learning (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Languille, 2014).

Blackmore (2013) recognizes that arbitrary links are made between academic quality and measurable student learning outcomes. Vidovich (2004) indicates, “In higher education, systematic mechanisms of pseudo-quantitative forms of accountability spanning research, teaching and, to a lesser extent, administration and service activities have proliferated to satisfy the demands of governments” (p. 342). Performance indicators are instruments to perpetuate the perception that quality at universities can be encapsulated in numbers no matter how tenuous the connection between the assessments and the inherent abstract nature of education. Riveros and Viczko (2015) claim that “learning is ontologically diverse” (p. 534). Time constraints and the desire to promptly deliver a report privilege quantitative information at the expense of more descriptive information (Reid, 2009). I argue that the expansive collection of numerical data creates only an artifice of quality and the confinement of learning to crude measures of learning is misguided.

Intangible aspects of a university education, such as imparting on students critical thinking skills, efforts to improve social inequities, or lessons for a more civic mindedness, are not valued as they do not easily lend themselves to measurement (Goldberg, 2006). One example of how existing measures of quality are inaccurate depictions is the use of admission averages. One could subvert this indicator of academic quality by not recognizing high admissions averages as evidence of academic quality. Rather than admiring institutions with

the highest admission cut-off grade point averages, reviewers could acknowledge that universities that admit students with lower admission averages have more of a profound and uplifting effect than other institutions with students already equipped with a higher baseline of academic knowledge and skills. Metrics can either overlook or misrepresent outcomes. In this example, it is debatable if an academic department with high academic standards that recruited the brightest students would be able to claim learning outcomes which could be attributed more to the drive and tenacity of these students than the high quality of the academic programs offered. The neoliberal framing of quality in higher education limits the multi-dimensional aspects of student learning and oversimplifies students' university education experiences.

Quality defined as vocational relevance. A preponderance of learning objectives that focussed on preparing students for the workplace emerged in this exploratory case study. The institutional guide for quality assurance recommended departments report on the accomplishments of their graduates, including rates of graduation, employment six months to two years after graduation, postgraduate surveys, and evidence of a “skills match.” Job-readiness was named as an important outcome and applied a utilitarian perspective to universities. This deflected from other socially-minded aspirations. In the context of this study, quality was closely associated with job training.

The use of metrics that trace professional competencies and graduate employment rates is consistent with the academic literature, which points to a privileging of labour market preparation in quality assurance efforts (Abbas, Ashwin, & McLean, 2012; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Fanghanel, 2007; Filippakou, 2011; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004; Singh, 2011). According to Brown (2015), “Economic and cultural shifts, the new college ranking systems that endorse them, along with the dismal contemporary economics of higher

education itself exert enormous pressures on colleges and universities and especially on liberal arts curriculums to abandon all aims and ends other than making students ‘shovel ready’ when they graduate” (p 192). Vocational relevance as a measure of quality invites employers to participate in shaping curriculum at unprecedented levels (Barnett, 1992; Kirstoffersen & Lindeberg, 2004). This emphasis on vocationally relevant outcomes is often tied to satisfying economic interests (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012). It also signals a departure from an emphasis on the public good and a moral imperative (Williams, 2016). The absence of a social lens to higher education is illuminated with the findings from this study.

Quality defined by multiple perspectives. The inclusion of employers in determining quality at universities was evident in the instructions provided in the university quality assurance resource document, which explicitly stated the need for consultation with various stakeholder groups (e.g. students, faculty, alumni, and employers). Although a highly consultative process was presumed to represent a fulsome examination of quality, how a balance was achieved amongst different stakeholders’ interests was not addressed. Alternatively, multiple perspectives may not have necessarily yielded diverse viewpoints if they all adhered to an overriding ideology and common view of quality. The premise that consulting with different interest groups led to academic quality and supported a robust quality assurance process was further challenged with the realization that departments were able to be selective in terms of which stakeholders they invited to participate in the quality assurance process.

Another concern with the efforts to obtain stakeholder input was a parity that appeared to exist between seeking input from different stakeholders and actually using their feedback to enact change in the curriculum. It was plausible that departments could simply go through the

motions of surveying students, faculty, recent graduates, potential employers, and, in some cases, professional associations or accrediting bodies. There was some uncertainty as to how feedback from stakeholders improved the academic programs. The act of seeking opinions on the quality of academic programs may or may not have resulted in change. It was left to a department's discretion to decide if and how they would act. The optics of the feedback being sought and not necessarily the information being used satisfied quality assurance purposes.

Although multiple perspectives could potentially open discussions to an array of ways of conceptualizing quality, the academic literature discusses an over-emphasis on the economic benefits to a university education that confines quality in higher education to a narrow view of commercially driven learning objectives (Abbas, Ashwin, & McLean, 2012; Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Brown, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Citton, 2013; Clegg & Smith, 2010; Fanghanel, 2007; Williams, 2016). Despite the efforts to solicit input from various perspectives, the academic literature suggests that a stakeholder approach, particularly one that frames students as consumers, diminishes rather than widens the inclusion of different perspectives (Apple, 2001; Brown, 2015; Singh, 2011). Salter and Tapper (2000) note, "As part of the continuing power struggle for control over the regulation of high status knowledge, quality assurance combines technical, bureaucratic and value elements in ways which give power to some and remove it from others" (p. 66). The supposed transparency and rigour of a quality assurance process could be compromised with decisions regarding whose voices and which data were seen as most significant and, thus, influential.

Overall, the discourses found in the printed documents reinforced themes of an economic framing of higher education. Themes of competing with other institutions, framing students as consumers, quantifying the academic experience, and preparing students for the

workforce exemplified the neoliberal marketization of universities. The findings for the second research question continue to coalesce into neoliberal explanations of quality. The next section gives details on the responses from participants in this study to highlight similar findings for the second research question.

Research Question #2

The second research question asked, ‘How is quality understood by key stakeholders, namely university faculty administrators who have responsibilities related to the institutional quality assurance process at the chosen Ontario university?’ As was found with the review of quality assurance documents, a coherent answer to what constituted quality was initially obscured. Quality was expressed as an implicit understanding and participants gave what seemed like their varied ideas on how to define quality. From the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews conducted with faculty administrators who were contributors to their departments’ quality assurance submissions, participants continued to uphold themes related to quantifiable data, international recognition, a return on investment, and student expectations.

A few participants noted that at times they were uncertain what was required and what was to be gained by undergoing a quality assurance review, which resulted in some submitting large amounts of data for their self-study submissions in the hopes they covered what reviewers might want. As participants contemplated the relevance of the six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics), they shared a general understanding that higher education was subject to a market approach. As one participant (Erin) summarized “The whole market influence on the university has profoundly changed what we do, how we represent ourselves and so on in such a vast way that it almost seems normal.” The themes of value for money, compliance, performance, and a game

metaphor arose from the interviews. They are discussed in the following section with references to relevant academic literature to demonstrate power-based discursive practices as understood through a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist perspective.

Quality defined as value for money. The responses from participants demonstrated how neoliberal values were expressed in quality assurance procedures. In the interviews, some participants equated quality to what students and governments considered as value for their money spent. Participants explained quality in terms of a return on investment for students paying tuition. These remarks illuminated how higher education was appreciated for potential economic rewards that students expected to receive from their degrees. The focus on the financial exchanges between tuition and education appeared as an over-arching message when participants discussed the principles of partnership, justice, appropriateness, and even ethics during the interviews. Remarks, such as “they’re paying a lot of money to be here” (Drew) and “given the investment we are asking of them, of course, they want to know what they are investing in” (Chris). The cost in terms of time and money were frequently evoked in the discussions with participants.

Participants in this study concur with many studies in the academic literature that describe how higher education has come to be conceived as a transactional rather than a transformational experience. For politicized reasons, politicians and policy makers borrow neoliberal concepts from the business sector and superimpose them on to higher education. Barnett and Parry (2014) describe “In the situation with which we were faced, there were close to hand interests of the state in securing a more accountable higher education system in which institutions were offering a ‘value-for-money’ educational experience to students” (p. 79). The ‘value for money’ proposition underscores expectations that student graduate from university

and become gainfully employed (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Barnett & Parry, 2014; Gibbs, 201; Singh, 2011). Other benefits of a university education are sidelined while neoliberal priorities are given primacy. However, Bunce, Baird, and Jones (2016) indicate that the positioning of higher education as a financial arrangement should be avoided as it dilutes the purpose of a university education and reduces students' ownership of their own learning.

Interestingly, a couple of outliers in the interviews used the opportunity to relate value for money to university budgets and raised the issues of declining public support for universities. Parker stated:

I keep hearing about our students having got such huge level of debt and value for money. Everything we do, we charge onto the student. Anything that we want to do that's new and exciting, we don't bear the cost of it. The student does. That's because the government doesn't fund the institution anymore. This is not a publicly-funded university. It's a publicly-supported university.

Parker was referring to the fact that Ontario receives the lowest per-student government funding in Canada (Council of Ontario Universities, n.d.). In 2013-14, government funding represented 27% of Ontario's total system-wide annual operation revenue (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2015). By 2017-18, the Ontario government had introduced a new budget framework with a funding envelope with more incentives for performance-based grants (Graham & MacIsaac, 2017). Another participant (Sam) noted the need for a different funding formula that was less contingent on enrollments and more supportive of activities that differentiate universities. Parker and Sam interpreted value for money as the relationship between the disbursement of government funding and academic quality. Both participants expressed their dissatisfaction with what they identified as a shortage of government resources. They argued that the standard approach adopted by governments to distribute funds per student was insufficient, flawed, and unjust.

Public accountability concerns coupled with limited government grants currently provides the premise for quality assurance (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Burnetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005; Cullen, Joyce, Hassall, & Broadbent, 2003; Guta, Nixon, & Wilson, 2013; Iacovidou, Gibbs, & Zopiatis, 2009; Rameriz, 2014; Reid, 2009; Saarinen, 2008). One participant (Erin) stated “if you have a kid and send them to school there’s that expectation that there is something beyond that school that has some oversight.” The neoliberal justification of quality assurance brings corporate sensibilities to universities and applies pressure on academic departments to display how they are protecting the financial interests of students and the public. Budgetary restraint at first glance may seem like common sense for universities; however, upon deeper reflection, fiscal prudence embedded in the quality assurance discourses exemplifies an ideological force.

The themes of consumerism and vocational relevance identified in the aforementioned quality assurance documents are repeated in the academic literature (Akdag & Swanson, 2012; Blackmore, 2009; Cabalin, 2015; Gibbs & Iacovidou, 2004; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Singh, 2011). Law (2010) discusses “the recent industrialization of the language of education, through which students become ‘customers’ or ‘consumers’, the curricula are not taught but ‘delivered’, aims and objectives of courses are changed to ‘learning outcomes’, and understanding and knowledge are replaced by ‘competence’ and ‘information’ respectively” (pp. 64-65). A preponderance of economic framing in the quality assurance discourses for higher education is a persistent theme in the academic literature (Abbas & McLean, 2007; Anderson, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Goldberg, 2006; Singh, 2011). The use of neoliberal market phrasing, such as value for money, accountability, products, services, customer satisfaction, and even quality assurance signals in the discourses the transfer of concepts from industry to higher education.

Paradoxically, one business principle of associating higher costs with superior quality products or services is absent in the literature and interviews. For universities in Ontario, the expectation is to offer high quality educational experiences despite fewer government resources. Shanahan and Jones (2007) describe the political changes affecting Canadian higher education institutions result in decreased federal block funding and greater involvement of the private sector. Students, governments, and the general public want reassurance quality academic programs would be made available despite decreasing public funds. Universities find themselves having to reconcile the cost of inflation with shrinking public funding. Only upon realizing the neoliberal framing of quality can leaders disrupt dominant narratives and contemplate alternative models for quality assurance that are more adaptive to universities and can promote ethical goals.

Quality demonstrated through compliance. For this exploratory case study, the departmental quality assurance process under observation formally began with a letter from the Office of the Vice-Provost, Academic Programs accompanied with a *Terms of Reference* template. It was noteworthy that the institutional quality assurance process used the *Terms of Reference* document as the starting point for reviews. While the template came with pre-existing text for the Dean to revise and customize for the department's review, it was also a chance for departments to define the basis of the review. It allowed each department to conceptualize quality measures that were most suitable for their academic programs. As presented by one participant (Lee):

It's interesting in that the process asks that we define what we want the performance of our students to be, the capabilities of our students to be, and then we judge ourselves relative to those levels. So it's interesting in that we both set the goals and measure our performance against them

Another participant (Pat) further described the *Terms of Reference* document:

The terms of reference, we all had, all of us on the search committee had an opportunity to provide input. But the terms of reference were ultimately the Dean's. And they should be. He's the one that's going to be making a judgment and using the quality assurance report so he needs to identify what he's looking for, what he wants to get out of it.

While Lee and Pat were the only two participants to explicitly identify this specific document as an opportunity for academic departments to insert their own meaning of quality, there were also other participants who suggested a need to have a more context-sensitive approach to quality assurance. Max stated "If you ask me what's the fundamental principle, I think the fundamental principle is has the school defined what it's after." The *Terms of Reference* document empowered departments to shape their own standards and metrics for academic quality, if they so chose to do so. For the department that was observed for this study, the opportunity to develop a contextual definition of quality was not recognized. Although departments could be more self-directed in defining quality, the weight and significance of this opportunity was understated and often overlooked. It was not impressed upon departments that such an important space was created for them to shape their own definitions. Rather than perceiving this document as a call to deeply consider how academic quality could be defined in their own terms, departments treated it simply as a perfunctory task.

Following the initial correspondence from the Office of the Vice-Provost, Academic Programs, the institutional quality assurance process continued with an invitation to all relevant faculty administrators and appropriate staff to an introductory workshop. The focus of the workshop presentation was to list the required documents needed for submission and describe what sources of data would be offered to support faculty administrators. The presentation slides also included a timeline for departments to schedule into their calendars. The discourse was clearly geared towards regulatory compliance and exemplified what could be construed as

“uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of activity rather than its result” (Foucault, 1977, p. 137). Personnel from a central administrative office charged with guiding the process issued the official correspondence, hosted the introductory workshop, and generated template documents. While the templates were intended to be helpful and instructional, they also limited one’s perspective and led individuals to think about the process in a certain way. The quality assurance process was framed as an administrative chore, rather than an invitation to participate in a vibrant discussion on academic quality.

Participants interviewed for this study reported there was a general apathy or indifference towards the quality assurance process on the part of their colleagues. This corollary theme ran through most of the interviews with remarks similar to “so up to two years ago when I stepped into this position, I had only the most remote contact with the quality assurance process and I think that's probably not a lot different for most of my colleagues” (Lee). When given the option to engage with the materials, such as view the data and read the documents, so few did at the department observed for this case study. The lack of engagement by the broader university community showed a superficial enactment of quality assurance. Quality assurance was viewed as a task faculty administrators needed to complete as part of their positions but for the rest of the university community (e.g. faculty, staff, students, and alumni), it was periphery to their activities. Once the review was completed, many faculty administrators resumed their routine work and operations without reflecting back on their quality assurance experiences.

Despite the suggestion that the process was superficial and had limited impact, the faculty administrators who were participants in this study indicated they saw value in the opportunity to take stock of their academic programs and administrative procedures. For Cal, a

self-study provided departments with significant insight into themselves, “I think the self-study is important in the process because I believe in self-reflection and without doing a self-study it’s hard to self-reflect. There’s an honesty and a justice around the ability to do a self-report.” The quality assurance process was described by one participant (Pat) as “a backward-looking static review of different dimensions of the program.” Another participant (Lee) concurred “The self-studies I’ve been involved in I’ve always found to be one of the more enlightening parts of the whole process.” There was some support for quality assurance reviews amongst participants. However, some participants pondered whether the periodic quality assurance reviews would result in any benefits for their departments.

These findings suggest quality assurance creates more of a demonstration of compliance to procedural obligations than a deeper commitment to what it intends to achieve. Anderson (2006) concludes that quality assurance itself has become more important than the achievement of assuring quality. Furthermore, institutional documents have taken on the form of a performance (Ahmed, 2007). Attempts to ‘show’ quality assurance becomes equally important, if not more, than actually locating quality. It is crucial that educational leaders do more than adhere to the administrative procedures for the quality assurance reviews they are undergoing. Educational leaders should continuously contemplate their responsibilities in relation to their constituents and the directions to which they are leading (Ciulla, 2005). Without deeply reflecting what objectives are embedded in university quality assurance, educational leaders may be upholding processes that they do not fundamentally support.

Curiously, study participants had very little to propose when posed with the question of what they would change of the quality assurance process if given the authority. One interpretation of the absence of innovation and proposals to re-calibrate quality assurance is

that despite general support for taking stock of one's department, there was also an element of apathy on the part of those participating in the quality assurance processes. As well, the lack of responses displayed a resignation of educational leaders to submit to the existing quality assurance process without deeply contemplating on its components.

This exhibits how dominant ideology is naturalized in the discourses. Elliott (2015) writes "A requirement or expectation for a leader to reflect critically upon their practice to make sure they are not the cause of the very problems they are trying to solve might in time foster ethical and sustainable educational leadership" (p. 310). Acceptance of what is perceived to be true or right is the result of power-based discursive practices. By shedding light on a presumably neutral and innocuous administrative process, this exploratory case study illuminates a disconnect between intent and practice.

Quality defined as a dramaturgical performance. Similar to the discussions related to compliance, there were recurring comments made by participants in the interviews referring to a dramaturgical performance aspect to enacting quality assurance. Quality assurance manifested itself as compliance to procedures and encouraged a 'theatre of impressions'. It appeared as though the staging of quality assurance was more important than deep reflections on how to enhance the quality of academic programs. Participants described a general sense of going through the motions. Erin noted "there is very much a sense in which it's a performance." If when people engaged in the quality assurance process they considered the activity as a performance, in a dramaturgical sense, then their engagement may have been contrived and disingenuous. Furthermore, the staging of the site visit transformed the exercise into a semblance of accountability rather than an actual attempt to improve academic quality.

While the department successfully met the requirement of hosting a site visit, there were some participants who questioned its credibility and social equity. A participant (Cal) voiced some concerns over the selection process for participants for the site visit “I think certain people chose the ‘right’ people to be interviewed and the ‘right’ people that will give the answers that you want. I don't know if that’s the best approach.” Some individuals were invited while others were not. This demonstrated an elevation of status for some and a silencing of others.

Additional concerns were raised by participants that the self-studies and site visits represented biased views. As explained by a participant (Cal) “I think people tend to put their best foot forward and may not acknowledge or may not even be aware of what our deficiencies are.” Another participant (Erin) concurred “As someone putting together a self-study, of course you’re self-interested. I mean who would put forward you know it's like the hanging the dirty laundry. I mean you know just like having company over you hide your mess, right?” Again, a separate participant (Parker) used the laundry analogy to discuss how departments conceal unfavourable aspects “How much of your dirty laundry are you showing?” It was assumed that the omission of less flattering characteristics of the department was an appropriate action in quality assurance. As one participant (Quinn) intimated “I'm not sure that on its own a review produces necessarily the most authentic picture.” Image management eclipsed a serious in-depth analysis of academic programs.

Other considerations to the dramaturgical metaphor raised by participants included frustrations regarding time constraints during the site visit which inevitably resulted in an incomplete and skewed portrayal of the department in question. Reviewers met with many different people in limited amounts of time. The group sessions were designed to efficiently

make use of the time allotted and limit anonymity. As a result, individuals were restricted from candidly sharing their views and thus, the reviewers' assessments were inevitably flawed and incomplete. Participants in quality assurance reviews were able to recognize that absolute confidentiality was impossible. What the researcher observed was that some gave glowing remarks when seated in front of the reviewers but afterwards privately disclosed their dissatisfaction with some departmental operations. This duplicity suggested that an individual would need to feel sufficiently secure in his or her position to voice a negative opinion. Most people had either no opportunity to interact individually with the reviewers or a chance to share their criticisms anonymously. Administrative staff, non-tenured faculty, and sessional instructors who perceived their positions as more vulnerable than others, may have not wanted to face adverse effects as a result of freely expressing themselves during the quality assurance site visit.

The academic literature indicates that people from marginalized groups in the workplace are less apt to feel they could express themselves when faced with structural limitations (Gardiner, 2017). According to Foucault (2000), "The idea that there could exist a state of communication that would allow games of truth to circulate freely, without any constraints or coercive effects, seems utopian to me" (p. 298). Total elimination of barriers to openly deliberate the quality of academic programs and the departments that offer them may not be achievable. However, it is the awareness that such impediments exist with which educational leaders should come to the discussions.

An unintentional outcome of the observed quality assurance process was the association of the abilities of the administrative staff to produce a polished self-study and plan a well-executed event with the quality of the programs. Like a theatrical production, the site visit's

schedule, meeting invitations, room reservations, catering and cleaning services were coordinated by ‘stage hands’. Other aspects of the site visit, such as weather, travel, hotel, meals, room ventilation, provision of pristine printed materials, and time-keeping which had no bearing on the quality of the academic programs were seemingly tied to the reviewers’ overall impressions. While reviewers should have had the cognizance to separate factors that were irrelevant to the academic programs, these unrelated activities were nonetheless potential emotive influences that could have had an unintentional impact on the reviewers’ evaluations. The optics of enacting a quality assurance appeared to be associated with the determination of quality.

There was a confluence of the administrative activities associated with quality assurance and the actual presentation of academic quality. The manner in which data from various sources were consolidated to comprise a narrative about the academic programs and the impressions of a well-oiled machine that were created during the site visit provided a choreographed depiction of quality. The choice of which data from numerous metrics to include in the self-study, the density and volume of text for the documentation, the tendency to use hyperbole in the narrative to explain oneself when data was unavailable or contradictory, the attention to appearances for both the self-study and the site visit, the exclusion of some voices in the face-to-face sessions, and the extravagant expense to host the reviewers became enmeshed in the demonstration of academic quality.

Several authors in the academic literature state that performance aspects of quality assurance are coupled with the insistence on measurement (Ball, 2012; Barnett & Parry, 2014; Morrissey, 2013; Webster, 2015). Furthermore, Foucault’s term ‘governmentality’ can be construed as the imposition of managerialism on universities. According to Morrissey (2013),

governmentality is interpreted as “efforts to frame, regulate and optimise academic life” (p. 799). Performance-based assessments shifts attention away from traditional end goals of universities to develop future moral citizens and frame higher education into more vocational terms. Economic values overshadow ethical and social imperatives.

In several ways, the components of quality assurance, such as the self-study and site visit, can be perceived as promotional or marketing activities for ‘selling’ a department’s virtue. Fairclough (1993) asserts:

The colonization of discourse by promotion may also have major pathological effects upon subjects, and major ethical implications. We are, of course, all constantly subjected to promotional discourse, to the point that there is a serious problem with trust: given that much of our discursive environment is characterized by more or less overt promotional intent, how can we be sure what’s authentic? (p 142).

Promotion and performance are close cousins in executing quality assurance. The performance aspect of quality assurance is also evident in the academic literature (Anderson, 2006; Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Locke, 2015; Webster, 2015). Macfarlane (2015) notes “Performative environments encourage inauthentic behaviour as individuals endeavour to conform” (p. 347). Almost as if by a sleight of hand, the illusion of having assured quality can be manufactured. Quality is assumed to have been assured through the enactment of a quality assurance process regardless if that is the case. The theatrics of presenting a department becomes inextricably entwined with compliance. One could argue that to receive the most helpful feedback on ways to improve, a department should present the most authentic reality of what people face every day.

The performance of quality assurance enacts governance mechanisms which are perceived by academics “as something that is done ‘to them’ or at best ‘by them’ but not ‘for them’” (Rowlands, 2012, p. 104). Correspondingly, Graham’s (2011) explains “when ‘doing’

discourse analysis within a Foucauldian framework, one looks to statements not so much for what they say but what they *do*” (p. 5). Quality assurance is the reification of Foucault’s idea of taken-for-granted acceptance of how our lives are organized. The dramaturgical performance associated with enacting a quality assurance process takes primacy over the actual search for academic quality.

Quality defined in a game metaphor. Another metaphor for quality assurance used by participants was to view the process as a game to be well played. Participants repeatedly stated their views that there were elements to quality assurance that could be construed as a game. One participant (Chris) alluded to this when discussing the process of selecting data to present to the reviewers “There are tensions around deciding what counts and what’s going to be focused on.” Departments were able to choose data sources that would construct the best possible image for reviewers to see. Performance indicators and rankings were chosen based on how they favored the departments. This meant that unflattering statistics were omitted if possible. When the inclusion of less complimentary data was required, they were accompanied with explanatory text that either discounted the validity of the metric or elaborated on changes that would occur in the near future to offset any shortfalls. For the latter, quality assurance, thus, relied on reassurances that improvements would be imminent. The carefully-crafted self-study and the well-orchestrated site visit involved decisions on what to show and what to exclude. In other words, they represented manoeuvres in the game of quality assurance.

The administrative heft witnessed in the production of the self-study could also be interpreted as a game tactic. The ‘scattershot’ approach of providing reviewers with an abundance of data was one way that departments ‘hit the mark’ in quality assurance. Not clear what were the targets, faculty administrators produced impressive voluminous self-studies

dense with details with the hope that amid the vast quantity of information they provided external reviewers would find what they wanted. It suggested that the quality assurance process was approached with serious intent and displayed a competency level of the administrators that should be commendable. It also speaks to the lack of expertise on the part of faculty administrators. A lengthy report with a large volume of data could also be construed as one way to compensate for faculty administrators' inexperience with a quality assurance process. The abundance of information could also be used to mask a department's deficiencies and even the lack of attention to quality assurance processes in between reviews. Given the six to eight year time lapse between cyclical reviews, there was a tendency to spontaneously produce quality assurance practices to gather data, which ordinarily were not readily available and widely disbursed. Alex observed "We only do many of these things when accreditation comes up, when really it should be a process that's going on all the time."

The concept of gaming of quality assurance also appears in the academic literature. In Elassy's (2015) study of faculty perceptions, quality assurance is seen as bureaucratic and a game of power. Eacott (2011) describes the cycle of planning and reporting as a sport for school administration where there are winners and losers. The metaphor of a game is also articulated by Foucault (2000) and his explanation of the powers exerted by government:

It is not a game in the sense of an amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing (p. 297).

Like the dramaturgical aspect to quality assurance, a game playing analogy erodes the confidence in the credibility of quality assurance. The game metaphor undermines and trivializes earnest intentions to genuinely ascertain quality.

Defining Quality Part II

This study provides an interrogation of the fundamental premise of quality assurance activities in higher education. The findings of this exploratory case study confirm assertions in the academic literature. The economic framing of higher education persists today and despite calls for change spanning the last two decades from different parts of the world, it appears the original neoliberal economic perspective remains intact. More needs to be studied and written about the notion of quality for quality assurance in higher education to gain traction, ignite a spark, and incite new discourses to re-engineer quality assurance in higher education. Before change can materialize, educational leaders need an awareness of the political framing that is actively shaping priorities at universities.

A neoliberal framing of quality. In this exploratory case study of one institution's quality assurance process, quality was found to be not clearly defined and alluded to in several different ways. Yet, throughout the discourses an overall consistent thematic schema reinforced that neoliberal political motives were being served. The data gathered from participants and documents for this study highlighted that beneath the ambiguity of what constituted quality there was a common economic thread interwoven in the discourses. The presence of neoliberalism was found in the contents of the written descriptions and emerged in the interviews. Quality was frequently explained as a competition between institutions and focused on student earning power after graduation. Ironically, while both the resource documents and participants agreed partnerships were an important principle for assuring the quality of academic programs, it was evident that a neoliberal framing encouraged competitive economic approaches. The quality assurance process created a race for ever-rising quality amid evaporating public funding.

According to Romanowski (2014) “neoliberalism has become a dominant ideology that permeates government public policies including educational reforms” (p. 174). These reforms typically coincide with budgetary constraints. Quality assurance, couched in neoliberal discourse, has become a ubiquitous part of university administration. Here, Foucault’s (1978) notion of “techniques of power” (p. 141) is brought to life in quality assurance. This research aims to bring to light the current untenable practice of defining and measuring academic quality to create “the calculated management of life...and the regulated formation of the social body” (Foucault, 1978, p. 140). I argue the current discourses may misdirect priorities for higher education. Apparent in the academic literature is an assertion that neoliberal ideology dominates the discourses currently for quality assurance. This is troublesome as a greater focus on public finances than non-financial performance marginalizes equity and social impacts (Bracci, Humphrey, Moll, & Steccolini, 2015). An economic agenda erodes public confidence in university academic affairs. A neoliberal form of reality creates a conceptualization of higher education within an economic framework and confuses quality assurance practices with university fiscal accountability (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Blackmore, 2013; Brown, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Law, 2010; Lycke, 2015; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Singh, 2011). Government-produced discourses purporting the importance of quality assurance allows for those in power to retract their funds without it seeming to hinder academic quality, when in fact it does. Quality assurance coupled with changing government funding packages may induce a tendency for universities to prioritize fiscal concerns over broader educative aims inclusive of more ethical concerns related to academic programs at universities.

While much of the literature and data gathered for this exploratory case study illuminates the dominance of neoliberal market principles in the discourses for quality

assurance, there is also evidence of other competing discourses and a yearning for a more responsive model for quality assurance. The over-arching intention of my research is to encourage educational leaders and other members of the university community to take pause and critically reflect on a trend that has become an integral part of contemporary universities. To this end, I draw from Foucault's work to inform my post-structuralist discourse analysis. Dixon (2013) writes, "Foucault's ideas are useful to examine and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions such as the legitimacy of regulatory mechanisms" (p. 580). Using a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis, the discourses of quality assurance are shown to actively shape our perceptions of quality.

Furthermore, quality assurance in higher education creates a new form of governance for universities (Cabalin, 2015; Filippakou, 2011; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Salter & Tapper, 2000; Singh, 2011). Singh (2011) claims, "Quality assurance has become an obligatory and entrenched part of governance arrangements and a power lever for steering change in higher education in many national higher education systems" (p. 488). In the academic literature, quality assurance is described as a neoliberal regulatory mechanism (Apple, 2001; Dill & Beerkens, 2013; Olssen & Peters, 2015; Picciotto, 2017; Rameriz, 2014; Singh, 2011). In this study, quality assurance could be seen to codify neoliberal ideology as the process elevates economic constructions of what is recognized as quality and in doing so, regulates the academic endeavours of universities.

My research specifically aims to encourage educational leaders to confront the limitations of the current quality assurance framework. Before doing so, one must understand the assumptions that underpin quality assurance processes. The objectives of my inquiry are two-fold: to de-construct the notion of academic quality and to underscore the underlying

assumptions for key stakeholders who are involved in enacting quality assurance processes. Thus, my study challenges the current social construction of quality and disputes the acceptance of quality assurance as an innocuous administrative process. As Lycke (2015) indicates “the criteria for the evaluation of the quality assurance systems may at first glance appear to be ‘value free’, but they are not. Indeed, the very existence of criteria marks the fact that all evaluations are value based” (p. 226). My findings intend to prompt educational leaders to re-examine their own assumptions on the neutrality of the current presiding quality assurance framework.

Through this exploratory case study, I problematize quality assurance discourses that have come to be integrated in everyday university administrative life. My post-structuralist interpretation aims to confront dominant framings to question how these discourses permeate our social practices. In keeping with Kellner’s (2003) contention that “poststructuralists also call for situated reason and knowledges, stressing the importance of context and the social construction of reality, which allows for constant reconstruction” (p. 56), this research utilizes a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis as an entry point to examining the definitions of quality, presumably the most central aspect of quality assurance. As Larsson (2015) postulates “bringing post-structuralism into institutional analysis may allow the development of new theoretical frameworks that acknowledge the constitutive and intersubjective aspects of ideas” (p. 176). This investigation focusses on how quality is perceived and how perceptions are naturalized in the dominant discourse in contemporary society. The focus of the research is to elucidate the constitutive nature of quality assurance discourses and add to the mounting call for change in how we approach quality assurance in higher education.

A need for a new way of defining quality. The findings from this study align with the academic literature with regards to how quality is both varied in operational definition but singular in its over-arching neoliberal intent. This is seen by the predilection for quantitative data. As discussed by one participant (Chris) when posed with the principle of justice “How to actually do that and where it’s done, I don’t see a lot of evidence of that or I would have to think a little bit more about what that would look like.” Another participant (Parker) explained “It doesn’t make sense to me to talk about it in a quality assurance way unless you say like I said this many hours in the curriculum is devoted to this and you can show that.” This preoccupation for the use of quantitative data distracts educational leaders and others engaged in quality assurance from the more meaningful task of explicitly creating their own definitions of quality. If a program meets its enrolment targets, has favourable survey evaluations, is research-intensive, receives sufficient funds, results in students’ timely completion of their programs, and leads in employment afterwards, then the academic program in question is deemed of sound quality.

The findings from this study show that a focus on compliance simultaneously overshadows concerns for clarity in meaning and reinforces a confluence of administrative heft with identification of quality. Documents are produced with copious amounts of data to demonstrate rigour and genuine intent regardless of how contrived the responses may be. Ahmed (2007) states “You can become good at audit by producing auditable documents” (p. 597). That is, an abundance information is equated to earnest effort which in turn translates into fulfilling the requirements.

The framing of students as consumers is another example of how neoliberalism influences the perceptions of academic quality. The quality assurance discourses include

preparing students for the job market and hold universities accountable to a neoliberal market approach. University programs are subject to judgments on the basis of their market worth (Barnett & Parry, 2014; Brown, 2015; Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Gibbs, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Lagrosen, Seyyed-Hashemi, & Leitner, 2004; Murmura, Casolani, & Bravi, 2016). University business operations, such as university payroll, procurement, IT, and financial management procedures that would be appropriate for the application of corporate practices are largely omitted from the intensive scrutiny of quality assurance processes. These administrative functions, have more in common than research, teaching and learning to commercial approaches to increase productivity and profit.

Through repetition, discourses legitimize and naturalize neoliberal conceptualizations of education. According to Filippakou (2011) “ideology has the power to frame a discourse and repetition has the power to naturalise ideology” (p. 22). Currently, a neoliberal framework dominates the discourses related to higher education (Goldberg, 2006; Guta, Nixon, & Wilson, 2013; Lucal, 2015; Romanowski, 2014). However, Goldberg (2006) indicates “dominant discourses are temporary and fluid, but operate to define the specifics of policy production at a particular historical and geographical moment” (p. 81). In my view, a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist stance accepts regulatory function of quality assurance and suggests the meanings for quality are political objects that lend themselves to re-conceptualizing quality as one perspective supplants another.

The very act of discerning something elevates one viewpoint (or voice) and negates another. In the academic literature, references are made to competing perspectives (Angermuller, 2014; Barnett, 1992; Baxter, 2002; Dixon, 2013; Riveros & Viczko, 2015). Dixon (2013) states a post-structuralist line of inquiry as an examination of the multi-vocal

nature of representations of reality. Barnett (1992) writes “there is less a genuine debate about quality, therefore, than a babel of voices, their different messages reflecting alternative starting points and claims on higher education” (p. 4). Angermuller’s (2014) characterization of a Foucauldian perspective on discourse involves nested voices which feature competing views that jostle for dominance. Foucault (1978) discusses how discourse has a meaning-value effect. Currently, the dominant discourse validates a neoliberal assertion of quality.

Despite the presence of a neoliberal framing in the discourse regarding quality assurance, participants made small hints at challenging the dominant narrative by suggesting the meaning of quality and associated measures could be more customized to programs. Pat discussed “quality for purpose” while Cal remarked “our curriculum has to be very fluid and change to changes in our scope of practice” and Drew indicated “one should evaluate a program in terms of the sort of protocols of the discipline.” These suggestions relate to what Law (2010) describes as a community of care and a holistic approach to attending to the moral and ethical aspects of quality. Similarly, Bogue (1998) asserts “In a community of caring, quality does not and cannot live apart from integrity” (p. 17). Although the neoliberal framing of quality assurance is the overriding perspective, there appeared to be an appetite for an alternative approach to quality assurance. A broadening of the definition of quality could create new frameworks for quality assurance that account for situational variables.

Paradoxically, the *Terms of Reference* document used to initiate the institutional quality assurance process could be used to subvert the existing paradigm. Regardless if the participants in this exploratory case study recognized the opportunity posed by the *Terms of Reference* document to define quality in their own terms, the unique space existed for faculty administrators to challenge the current neoliberal framework for quality. This can be leveraged

in other settings to create new models for quality assurance. According to Goldberg (2006) “Drawing on contexts is a useful way of conceiving policy as it helps to explain how different contexts offer different material possibilities” (p. 80). This alludes to Riveros and Viczko (2015) who describe the multiplicity of reality deriving from different contexts. Institutions have their own histories and therefore, have different successes along with their own specific challenges (Vidovich, 2004). An appreciation of each institution’s strengths and areas for improvement cannot be addressed in a rigid quality assurance framework that relies heavily on numerical data and vocational skills development. By incorporating institution-specific considerations, quality assurance practices could consider the contextual factors that give each university its identity.

In the academic literature, it is acknowledged that situational and contextual factors are needed when considering higher education leadership and quality assurance practices (Barnett & Parry, 2014; Law, 2010; Liu, 2015; Rottmann, 2007). The fluidity of discourses allows for adaptive definitions of quality fitting local settings. The avoidance of efforts that could be deemed miseducative require introspection (Ball, 2015; Webster (2015). A re-imagining of quality assurance in non-economic terms could create new models for quality assurance that recognize environmental factors that normally are disregarded. For instance, an institution’s ability to retain students may depend on its geographic location and thus, comparative measures are inappropriate as they fail to capture the impact of contextual variables, such as long commutes or a greater proportion of students working part-time while attending university full-time for one institution. In these cases, lower retention rates are more indicative of student demographics than academic quality. Alternatively, a university could be appreciated for its

level of community engagement or its research efforts to tackle social barriers or the proportion of course content dedicated to social issues.

The mixed responses to what is meant when referring to quality underscores the quandary in which educational leaders find themselves. While it is reasonable for the public to demand a ‘return on their investment’ and thus, apply an economic frame to higher education, including quality assurance, there is a tension that exists when job readiness outweighs social aims. Additionally, Thomson, Hall, and Jones (2012) state “while educational policy-makers bemoan the ways in which educational reforms falter, they both valorize and punish leaders for their key role in change” (p. 1). Such insight in the politicized environment within which educational leaders must navigate themselves points to the difficulties associated with their roles. Educational leaders are tasked to assure matters that are complex and inherently conflicted. The findings from this study suggest quality is a euphemism in the discourse thus acting as a regulatory mechanism.

There is sufficient ambiguity in the discourses to make it impossible to determine if quality has been achieved. Aptly summated by one of the participants (Chris) in this study, “If there’s too much ambiguity then how do we know that we’re holding true?” Truth, is explained by Foucault (1980) as “linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it” (p. 133). A post-structuralist perspective applied to this exploratory case study exposes the meaning of quality as a social construction supporting quality assurance as a mechanism of power. Through this research, an understanding of discourses as social practice illuminates the constructed meanings of quality. If we can re-discover definitions of quality that are clear, yet agile and institution-specific, we can support educational institutions and their leaders to enact change.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the key findings from the research addressing each research question were discussed. This exploratory case study used a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis to investigate quality assurance documents and transcripts from a series of semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders (e.g., Deans, Associate Deans, Program Directors, Program Coordinators). This allowed for an examination of how quality was defined in the context of an institution's quality assurance process. The exploratory case study not only detailed a quality assurance process at one Ontario university, it endeavoured to recognize how political ideology was interwoven into the quality assurance discourses. The pliable nature of discourse and how meanings were derived from more implicit than explicit understandings were explored in this study. More specifically, this study hoped to provoke an awareness that what constituted quality was taken for granted and how discourse itself is political in nature.

Both the findings from this study and the academic literature (Ashcroft & Rayner, 2012; Becket & Brookes, 2008; Elassy, 2015; Filippakou, 2011) demonstrated that operational definitions of quality seemingly oscillated depending on the perspectives of different groups. However, the variations fell within an over-arching economic framing. Despite the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the quality assurance process, a neoliberal framework created a narrow understanding of quality and resulted in a failure to address institutional differences and complexities. There was a tension between quality assurance metrics and the intangible nature of education. By insisting on quantifying the transformative essence of education through measurements of efficiency and vocational relevance, quality assurance became entrenched with neoliberal ideals. More discussion on what kinds of evidence would be acceptable in quality assurance is needed.

It would be naïve to think that quality assurance provides a complete and accurate picture of any department. Fawkes (2015) claims “we present different aspects of ourselves in different locations: sometimes backstage preparing; sometimes front of house, performing” (p. 677). The same metaphor could be applied to illuminate the dramaturgical displays of quality assurance. When the educational goals are misdirected towards increasing efficiencies and improving productivity, efforts can be misplaced while authenticity and ethical goals are deferred. Cabalin (2015) notes “quality is transformed into an economic value more than an educational goal” (p. 237). It is this transformation that draws one into a system of performances, such as quality assurance, that can be oppressive. A disparity between government agendas and educational goals appears in the academic literature related to quality assurance. Other inferences are also made of a moral poverty in quality assurance practices (Gary, 2006, Kincheloe, 1999; Webster, 2015). Bogue (1998) regards quality assurance processes “as empty and futile exercises – serving as busywork to occupy some administrators” (p. 11). In emphasizing accountability, governments and regulatory agencies have encouraged educational institutions to channel their energies towards economic considerations and lose sight of ethical goals to better society.

The discourse for quality assurance in higher education facilitates an instrumental approach to quality assurance where procedural compliance is more the focus than delving deeply into broader definitions of academic quality. The reporting of performance indicators emphasizes compliance of procedural aspects and deflects from other important educational goals. The attention on compliance risks the process becoming too much about a set of contrived performances. The current ambiguous definition of quality lends itself easily to conflation. Weckenmann, Akkasoglu, and Werner (2015) explain “a paradigm change does not

happen due to a single event or invention but usually occurs over a series of – sometimes small – changes and contribution” (p. 290). Small incremental steps towards a more expansive model for quality assurance need to continue to re-conceptualize quality assurance. A model for each institution to explicitly define what quality means in their own contexts is proposed as a result of the findings from this study.

In the final chapter, I draw together implications from this research study and make recommendations for future research. By revisiting the initial areas of significance identified in chapter one, I suggest how we might enact change by engaging the educational community and creating alternative models for quality assurance. I recount the journey undertaken through my research endeavours as I reflect on my original theoretical and conceptual frameworks used and present closing comments pertaining to this study.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

In this chapter, I address the implications of the findings for this exploratory case study and make recommendations for future research related to quality assurance in higher education. I reflect on the recurring themes that emerged in this study as well as in the academic literature. This exploratory case study presents a data point in the larger landscape of quality assurance. By detailing an Ontario example, this research hopes its reinforcement of themes found also in other studies magnifies the deficiencies of the current model for assessing academic quality at universities. The findings from this study, thus, add to the growing discontent in the academic literature and give voice to an ethical perspective that challenges the current neoliberal regime. By posing questions that illuminate what is often taken for granted, I consider what other alternatives one may adopt to approach quality assurance. I recommend alternative ways of framing quality and suggest further research for developing broader, more inclusive frameworks that could better serve social goals in higher education.

Final Reflections

By problematizing the notion of quality, my research aimed to expose underlying assumptions embedded in our quality assurance discourses. The findings from my study suggested a political resilience to neoliberalism and its pervasiveness in our discourses. According to Foucault (2000) “between games of power and states of domination, you have technologies of government” (p. 299). This exploratory case study of one Ontario university displayed quality assurance as one such technology that both served and propagated governmental interference in university affairs.

My findings not only echoed the academic literature with regards to the marketization of education, the data gathered also illuminated the susceptibility of universities to over-

emphasize business sensibilities and marginalize some social issues. The framing of education in economic terms can usurp ethical goals. In some instances, the demonstration of assuring quality took priority over critical discussions regarding what qualified as quality. I argue that when the focus was weighted too heavily on compliance, the quality assurance process lent itself to contrived responses. Moreover, extraneous matters intermingled and transformed the enactment of quality assurance into a theatrical production.

This discussion of academic quality at one Ontario university intends to elucidate that our discourses are socially constructed. Through a Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist perspective, this research views power is present in discursive practices and reinforces dominant neoliberal ideology. I implore those engaged in quality assurance in higher education to reflect on the current ways of thinking about quality. A seemingly benign and mundane administrative process, quality assurance appears neutral and value-free. However, this study claims quality assurance practice is far from innocuous. Rather, it is a governance mechanism for applying ideological forces to universities.

As stated in earlier chapters, two major influences shaped this research endeavour – Barnett and Parry’s (2014) guiding principles for analyzing quality assurance and Foucault’s (1972/1977/1980/1982/2000/2011) seminal work on power, knowledge, governance, and discourse. Inspired by Barnett and Parry’s guiding principles, I adapted them for my study. As an initial analytical framework, six guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour, and Ethics) supported the exploration of how quality assurance was understood at an Ontario university. Meanwhile, Foucault’s views informed the post-structuralist perspective that was applied to this study. As part of my reflections in this chapter,

I revisit these two influences to explain to what extent they supported the final outcomes of my research.

Checking my roadmap. Barnett and Parry's (2014) guiding principles inspired me to contemplate how other notions, such as transparency, partnerships, and justice were incorporated in the quality assurance discourses. I adapted their original five guiding principles (Transparency, Partnerships, Justice, Appropriateness, Rigour) and added a sixth (Ethics) to use as navigational tools as I journeyed through the vast and complex academic terrain related to quality assurance in higher education. The principles offered different approaches to viewing quality and created a roadmap for how to proceed in this study. They created a preliminary line of inquiry for reviewing the academic literature as well as for developing a narrative guide for interviewing faculty administrators at the university studied. In short, these principles provided the initial conceptual framework for exploring how quality was defined. As my research activities progressed, however, I found myself referring less and less to my original roadmap as I forged my own path. The focus transferred from the guiding principles to broader emergent themes. While the six guiding principles helped initially to explore explicit aspects of quality assurance, they later gave way to the broader framing of quality. This exploratory case study evolved to study the deeper contours of the themes of compliance, confluence, marketization, and performance related to quality assurance. Thus, my initial roadmap was checked less frequently as the principles fell into the background and broader themes took to the foreground.

Cleaning my looking glass. In contrast, Foucault's (1972/1977/1980/1982/2000/2011) contributions to the academic literature were a constant companion on my journey. Like other scholars, I used his work to support my post-structuralist perspective. Quality, as it was expressed in the quality assurance discourses, was first deconstructed and then examined for

over-arching themes. My Foucauldian-informed post-structuralist ‘looking glass’ was the lens used to inspect the discourses. Liu (2015) contends “in a Foucauldian sense, micro-level practices of leadership can be understood to both reflect and reproduce wider systems of thought around power, authority and legitimacy” (p. 7). As leaders, we are implicated in the performance of dominant power mechanisms. My own enactment of quality assurance practices supports the current framework. Foucault (1982) claims a historical consciousness of our present circumstance is required. My study hopes to add to the growing research that intends to heighten an awareness of how quality assurance reflects and reproduces the dominant neoliberal ideology.

Discourses give breath to neoliberal regulatory mechanisms, like quality assurance, by stressing efficiencies and the need for greater surveillance of educational experiences. My main argument is that ways of evaluating universities that primarily uphold neoliberal ideals should be re-examined. Thomson, Hall, and Jones (2012) indicate “Foucault also suggested that discourses are not simply top down but circulate throughout an organization, neighbourhood and a system” (p. 14). The system of discourses includes an ethical dilemma for each of us as we decode our actions and consider the choices we must make in our everyday lives to exist within and, at times, in conflict with social practices. This research urges educational leaders to critically reflect on the current quality assurance framework and assess what actions to take. Educational leaders are also asked to contemplate if there are opportunities to promote alternative frameworks that are better suited for universities and can serve social goals in ways currently not realized. By incorporating the use of a post-structuralist discourse analysis to this exploratory case study, my research advocates for a broader view of academic quality and quality assurance. I suggest a closer look at ethical and social justice approaches to educational

leadership as a preliminary step towards creating alternative frameworks for quality assurance in higher education.

Implications

The first chapter of this dissertation introduced six significant aims: 1) challenging assumptions embedded in quality assurance in higher education; 2) inserting an administrative staff perspective; 3) representing a Canadian context; 4) proposing a post-structuralist discourse analysis as a tool for deciphering deep-seated political interests in the framing of quality assurance; 5) advancing ethical leadership; and 6) developing new quality assurance frameworks. I now return to these aims to discuss how these were achieved with this research.

Challenging assumptions. It was with the intention to probe the taken-for-grantedness of quality assurance that I embarked on this research. Despite the academic literature that showed a cognizance of power dynamics implicit in institutional discourses (Anderson, 2006; Furman, 2012; Gewirtz, Dickson, & Power, 2004; Goldberg, 2006; Greenhalgh, 2015; Liu, 2015; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Saarinen, 2008), participants in this study appeared less aware of ideological and philosophical influences on the framing of quality in quality assurance practices. Thus, participants seemed to accept the current market approach to higher education and there was a lack of inspiration to make change. This was evident with participants in this study unable to think of any ways to re-imagine quality assurance. Beyond a couple of minor modifications to the structuring of the site visits, none of the participants suggested substantive re-conceptualizations of quality for quality assurance. It was assumed the economic framing was the only option for quality at universities. This demonstrated the naturalization of neoliberal thought that deters people from thinking creatively and critically of alternatives. The process itself was accepted as fixed, impermeable and unavoidable.

Interestingly, when students were seen as consumers, then arguments were made that students were entitled to helpful consumer information. This would aid in their decision-making process when selecting their universities. External rankings were often framed as useful data to support student choices. Ironically, the same arguments used to criticize rankings, such as the public not fully understanding the basis of the statistical representations or the information being taken out of context, were disregarded if the rankings were favourable. As one participant (Parker) shared “people only care about rankings if you do well, right. If you don’t do well, you don’t mention them.” The same reasons for discounting rankings were applied by participants to express in their interviews why not to share quality assurance documents. In the interviews for my exploratory case study, several participants voiced concerns with sharing quality assurance documents to a public audience that may be too uninformed of the context or nomenclature of a specific program to comprehend the documentation properly. However, when it suited their purposes, departments cited favourable rankings or shared their quality assurance documents as proof of quality. It was a slippery slope to determine what mattered and what did not. It seemed that those determinations were somewhat discretionary.

I argue naturalized discourses of quality assurance results can in complacency. Caught in a web of neoliberal discourses, educational leaders may neglect a moral imperative on which universities were founded and societies are dependent. Quality assurance has transformed educational leaders, faculty administrators, administrative staff and even, to some extent, students into cogs in the mechanization of neoliberal governance. Educational leaders who enact quality assurance without deeply reflecting on the ideological undercurrents may find themselves complicit in perpetuating principles to which they do not agree. Those engaged in

quality assurance in higher education are encouraged to critically understand the environments in which they practice. For quality assurance to be insightful, rewarding, and impactful, the politicized discursive forces need to be exposed and questioned. Without a critical assessment of assumptions, educators and leaders may adopt a narrow view of quality assurance that summons a marketplace logic with less consideration of ethical goals for higher education.

Inserting an administrative staff perspective. Through this exploratory case study, I shared a unique perspective. My field notes offered my personal observations recorded while employed in an administrative staff position during the time of this study. My field notes included my reflections as I wondered if the presentation of a lengthy self-study and a well-organized site visit were potentially factored into the reviewers' evaluation of the academic quality of the department under observation. My behind-the-scenes details of the emotional experiences associated with one department's enactment of a quality assurance process revealed an aspect that is understated in the academic literature.

The voices of administrative staff, who are engaged in university quality assurance processes, are largely absent in the academic literature. Although some have the power to affect the system from within, administrative staff are frequently not recognized as key stakeholders who have contributions to the quality assurance discourses. Staff who work closely with quality assurance processes have no forum to share their perspectives and experiences. The inclusion of administrative staff engaged in quality assurance processes coupled with a greater awareness of the ideological assumptions that underpin discourses would allow for multiple voices to weigh in and create a richer understanding of our current quality assurance framework. This could potentially lead to the discovery of solutions that are more meaningful, context-driven, and sensitive to all those involved.

Representing Canadian content. Another understated perspective in the academic literature was research on quality assurance in a Canadian context. Upon review, I found that only a modest number of studies on quality assurance occurred in Canada (Johnston, 2013; Page, 1995; Rintoul & MacLellan, 2016; Shanahan & Jones, 2007; Walker, 2008). This exploratory case study provided insight into an institutional quality assurance process at one Ontario university. The focus of this study was to describe how Ontario's Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) was operationalized at the institutional level. What this study found was the outward appearance of accountability appeased interested parties and potentially deflected from the scrutiny of academic quality. Upon review of resource and policy documents, I found a clear and consistent definition of what constituted quality was missing. Further, this study occurred at the end of Ontario's first eight-year implementation cycle of its quality assurance framework. This research posed potential insights into Ontario's QAF at a time when the province is in discussions of how to evaluate its first quality assurance cycle.

Considering the potential of ethical leadership. The muted moral imperative for universities became apparent in both the academic literature and the findings for this study. During the interviews for this research study, participants struggled to identify how the principles of justice and ethics fit into the quality assurance process. It should be noted that a broader perspective of justice does include concerns with economics affected by increasing tuition; yet justice is not mentioned in quality assurance. The analysis of the data for this study led to the conclusion that the moral and ethical components of university operations were disconnected from higher education to the extent that members of the university community were challenged to place them. My study found the articulation of what was quality was

clouded by the dominant economic narrative. The neoliberal framing of quality obscured ethical goals.

Ethics is central to educational leaders creating and supporting organizational values (Northouse, 2016). Rintoul and MacLellan (2016) claim “ethical leadership can be construed as directed by a process of influencing people through *collectively-agreed* principles, values, and beliefs that embrace conceptions of trust, honesty, justice, and dignity by, and for, all members of the organizational university community” (p. 45). Ironically, social justice goals frequently are named in institutional and departmental mission statements, yet are then neglected in day-to-day operations and decisions. Ethical leadership requires more than lip-service. An ethical perspective should permeate every aspect of institutional culture. If technical knowledge subordinates questions of social values and ethical choices (Kincheloe, 1999; Romanowski, 2014), then the bond between ethics and effectiveness that is the focal point of ethical leadership (Ciulla, 2005) is opaque. Sergiovanni (2005) states “leadership as moral action is a struggle to do the right thing according to a sense of values and what it means to be a human being” (p. 115). The realization that there is untapped potential to reconfigure quality assurance beyond a neoliberal framework is an important finding because it provides a motive for change.

A current trend to subdue conceptual thinking for operational mindedness compromises an organization (Gardiner, 2015). Ethical leadership, if embedded in quality assurance processes in higher education, could re-invent the exercise from an administrative burden to a moral activity for educators, staff, and students. I argue that there is an opportunity to insert ethical considerations in all quality assurance processes, which in turn would impact educational endeavours. Langlois and Lapointe (2014) describe ethical leadership as a mode of governance that can steer educational institutions towards a harmonious co-existence of an

array of interests. As an objection to standardization, I propose ethics in educational leadership can offer an innovative alternative that creates adaptive responses to the demands for quality assurance. This could allow for institutions to better reconcile the existing chasm between quality assurance processes and ethical academic values.

Proposing new frameworks. All participants reported that they engaged in their department's quality assurance process with earnest efforts, which involved the dedication of countless hours and copious amounts of information. Yet my research findings suggested that a hodgepodge of data was conflated with having a robust process. Volume and rigour were considered one and the same. The optics of enacting quality assurance was featured prominently in the interviews and resource documents. The conflation of procedural compliance with the actual assurance of quality was one of the prominent themes in my research. This illuminated the shift in viewing academic quality from internal and implicit to external and explicit. In effect, the concern for procedural adherence obscured other educational aims.

The current predicament of enacting an assurance process without knowing what constitutes quality is analogous to building a rocket ship while in flight. The findings from this study highlight the difficulties faced by institutions as quality assurance is associated with a performative nature in a neoliberal context. I contend that the quantification and datafication of universities incite a counter-productive competitive climate for higher education. Universities find themselves trapped in a constant competition to achieve greater accomplishments relative to others and their own achievements are often taken out of context (Apple, 2001; Ball, 2012). The current enactment of an assurance process without knowing what constitutes quality is misguided and prone to misalignment with educational endeavours. Without a flight plan for

quality assurance in higher education, educational leaders could embark on an ill-advised journey without ever knowing if they have arrived at their destinations.

What is needed is a more nuanced, context-sensitive alternative to quality assurance. In order to counter social inequalities, higher education needs broader conceptualizations of quality (Abbas & McLean, 2007). One way to reconstitute quality assurance is to transfer some of the weight placed on comparative reporting of standard key performance indicators to other types of institutional intelligence that illustrate how universities address social inequities and address these issues through their research, teaching, and administrative activities. According to Rintoul and MacLellan (2016) “universities can help improve the societies within which they are located; therefore, supporting ethical leadership leading to good governance practices that can be pursued on an on-going basis” (p. 52). That is, universities have a duty to improve their local environments. If social goals are explicitly articulated in the quality assurance discourses, then institutions would need to channel their efforts on offsetting adverse effects of inequities that continue to persist in our society. Educational leaders should develop quality assurance processes that incorporate collective ways of defining quality and collaborative methods for achieving social goals.

By challenging assumptions, educational leaders can create an institutional culture of critical reflection that promotes a new form of governance through ethical leadership and gives birth to socially-just quality assurance frameworks. Kellner (2003) urge educational practitioners to develop a pedagogy of the oppressed that prompts the learner to empower themselves through social transformation instead of conforming to hegemonic views. Similarly, educational leaders could apply the pedagogy of the oppressed to themselves by questioning the work they do and interrogating their discourses. Educational leaders should propose

alternative frameworks for quality in higher education. The implicit definition of quality can be viewed as an opportunity to seek new definitions that is sensitive to an institution's own idiolect. Rather than an economic regulatory tool, quality assurance has the potential to support broader aims, including revealing and dismantling barriers to achievement.

For example, an ecological perspective or community of care framework for educational leadership and quality assurance are recurring proposals in the academic literature. These suggestions offer alternative discourses and negate the bewilderment some faculty administrators experience when having to navigate themselves in a sea of data. Several scholars propose an educational eco-system (Raven, 2005; Furman, 2012; Weaver-Hightower, 2008). For instance, Fallon and Paquette's (2014) symbiosynergetic paradigm provides a substitute to dominant Euro-centric conceptualizations of higher education. An ecological framework offers a potential disarming of the dominant economic mechanism that quality assurance currently represents. The virtue of a quality assurance eco-system framework is that a holistic view would be inherent. This gives space to consider other objectives of education, such as a moral imperative, critical thinking, or ways to develop socially responsible citizenship.

Another example is Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort, which urges educational leaders to re-examine their own biases and extend the dialogue to be more inclusive of different groups, especially those who are not ordinarily part of the discussions. Blackmore (2009) continues to discuss Boler's pedagogy of discomfort and recommends an intense reflexivity. Research could seek new ways of evaluating academic programs and integrate social justice efforts as a component to university quality assurance. Apple (2001) claims "education must both hold our dominant institutions in education and the larger society up to rigorous questioning, and at the same time this questioning must deeply involve those who benefit least

from the ways these institutions now function” (p. 410). That is, a scrutiny of how priorities are framed should occur to identify who are advantaged and who are disadvantaged in the process. Other suggestions to unseat the current economic framework include Barnett and Parry’s (2014) guiding principles, Jackson’s (1998) partnership in trust, Moller’s (2009) model for reciprocal accountability, and Furman’s (2012) dimensions of social justice leadership. They present potential frameworks for quality assurance that invite broader ways of envisioning academic quality and quality assurance in higher education. Future studies should propose new and more socially-just models of quality assurance.

Recommendations for Future Research

We need to re-imagine quality assurance processes where current accountability practices are replaced with institutional-specific narratives that demonstrate how universities are fulfilling their mission and addressing social goals. A focus on dismantling unjust norms opens the doorway to re-framing what defines accomplishments and failures and this, in turn, offers alternative ways to conceiving quality. Upon critical reflection, we can re-shape our institutions and their processes. Moreover, the discussions on how to venture forward can benefit from a more well-rounded view of what constitutes the value of a university education. Educational leaders and researchers, alike, need to reconcile the gap between performativity and a committed pursuit of academic quality that serves a moral purpose. The following recommendations for future research are presented in this final section based on the findings from this study.

Research inclusive of underrepresented groups. Educational leaders need to acknowledge institutional power struggles are reinforced in the discourses and some disadvantaged groups continue to be marginalized. According to Abbas and McLean (2007)

“the opportunity is being missed to develop alternative quality systems that would reveal... ‘biases’ and to provide education with a basis for tackling distributive injustices” (p. 724). We do ourselves a disservice when we exclude some interest groups from the conversation. It infers they have little to contribute. I advocate for future research and discussions related to quality assurance processes that would include the perspectives of administrative staff and representatives from marginalized groups. Inclusion of staff and other stakeholder groups currently excluded could offer a different way of framing quality assurance.

Research utilizing a post-structuralist discourse analysis. Educational leadership need to include examining discursive practices as part of their work. Initial critical reflection offers a starting point for educational leaders to realize the extent to which education has come to be framed mainly in economic terms and what social impacts result from the over-marketization of higher education. Neoliberal priorities are operationalized through policies and processes, such as quality assurance. Tutak, Bondy, and Adams (2011) contend “raising questions about ‘the way things are’ and wondering how they might be done differently are the habits of those who embrace a ‘critical’ approach to education” (p. 66). A post-structuralist discourse analysis has the capacity to acknowledge the power-based interpretations of quality and recognize which constituents are most vocal. A post-structuralist discourse analysis creates an awareness that some discourses dominate and through repetition become naturalized while others are silenced and suppressed.

Using a post-structuralist discourse analysis, this study found a marketization of education was naturalized through the frequent use of economic terms in quality assurance discourses. In various ways, neoliberal framing of quality was repeatedly shown to rationalize quality assurance. A preponderance of discourse originating in the commercial sector was

acclimatized to quality assurance in higher education (Cabalin, 2015; Law, 2010). While explicit definitions of quality could not be found in the literature and the data collected for this exploratory case study, the over-arching economic theme for higher education was undeniable.

Further research should investigate how discourse shapes the work of educational leaders and how, in turn, educational leaders reinforce the discourse. An understanding of how quality can be defined from different perspectives challenges the assumption that a neoliberal economic lens is the only way to view academic quality. Educational leaders could engage in fruitful discussions, create action-oriented solutions, and incite change for more expansive ways of approaching current quality assurance practices. Researchers are encouraged to continue to employ a post-structural discourse analysis to disrupt assumptions. A fresh theoretical approach to education considers what may be versus what is and imagines a future that inserts a mandated social responsibility to be addressed within university administrative endeavours.

Examining new theoretical frameworks for quality assurance. Although there is an abundance of research on quality assurance in higher education, the concerns raised regarding a neoliberal economic framing of academic quality have yet to result in substantive changes to quality assurance practices. Educational leaders can easily find themselves engaging in a bevy of activity geared towards meeting regulatory demands. The findings of this study conclude that the necessary preliminary task of delving into what defines quality appears to be missing. Without explicitly stating educational end goals, universities risk engaging in superficial processes that merely provide the optics of quality assurance. Findings from this study suggest current quality assurance efforts may be fraught with bias and misdirection.

Despite the inordinate amount of time and effort dedicated to display to others that universities were assuring quality, there was uncertainty amongst participants in the study and in the academic literature as to what impact quality assurance process had beyond the busywork of demonstrating good intentions. For the participants in this study, it was unclear how the data and the results of the quality assurance review would be synthesized and disseminated to benefit future efforts. In the absence of extensive distribution and engagement with the information, much of the data was shelved. Thus, the potential benefits of the quality assurance review were relegated to archives with limited or no effect on the university.

The findings for this study showed that the marketization of education dominated the discourses surrounding quality assurance practice and left little room for addressing larger societal issues of inequity. A proposed approach to quality assurance in higher education that was more integrated, nuanced, and socially-sensitive could limit the existing neoliberal mechanisms and alter the focus. Future quality assurance practices with a social justice perspective and ethical leadership basis could insist universities look at distributive injustices and engage faculty to pursue new knowledge for greater social good and purposeful citizenship.

This research highlights a preponderance of commerce-type measures of success applied to academic programs and leaving little space for the human experiences which define education; therefore, leading to a misdirection of efforts. There is an incongruence between the current approach to quality assurance and higher education. An economic lens borrowed from the business sector is problematic in that it offers too narrow a view of higher education. It assumes principles used in manufacturing a material product can capture in totality something as intangible and transformative as education. The conversion of quality into quantifiable terms facilitates the neoliberalization of higher education. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue

“bureaucratization and other forms of organizational change occur as the result of processes that make organizations more similar without necessarily making them more efficient” (p. 147). Current quality assurance measures applied to academic programs require re-examination to adjust the current misalignment that occurs when a neoliberal lens is utilized for assessing certain aspects of academic quality. However, future research efforts need to do more than identify the incongruence between education and business mechanisms but also need to propose new frameworks for quality assurance.

Educational leaders either lack sound theoretical grounding or voice their thoughts at levels too vague, which thwart their efforts to disentangle themselves from existing neoliberal policies (Bacchi, 2000; Blackmore, 2013). Apple (2001) notes “while such meta-theoretical work is crucial, its over-use has left a vacancy” (p. 421). Although there appears to be a growing discontentment with quality assurance amongst academics in the literature, only a few propose concrete examples for higher education to combat their current practices. In addition to aforementioned scholars, such as Boler (1999), Furman (2012), Fallon and Paquette (2014), who offer innovative approaches, Gibbs and Iacovidou’s (2004) pedagogy of confinement, Moller’s (2009) model for reciprocal accountability, and Law’s (2010) community of care offer promising practical frameworks to re-conceptualize quality assurance in higher education. These frameworks are not discrete and exclusive of one another. Rather, they can be conceived jointly to provoke thought and generate discussions around quality assurance that have yet to be explored.

Closing Comments

This thesis concludes by arguing that lost in the quagmire of reporting requirements is the act of reflecting on what information is being captured and for what purposes. In one of my

previous administrative positions, I once asked an Undergraduate Program Director the question “How do we know the changes we made had an impact?” He responded with a quizzical look on his face and silence fell on the room. My call to educational leaders is to use the analytical tools we have available to us to reclaim educational values that benefit society and a greater social good. The findings of this study can be understood as one critique of the current approach to quality assurance in higher education. The limitations of the existing evaluation model include a standardized approach to induce competition and false rank ordering, an over-emphasis on compliance that leads to dramaturgical performances, and an over-arching economic framework that misdirects attention away from contextual factors.

Moreover, the present findings confirm a disconnection between the process and educational aims to improve our social condition. The important work of interrogating what we take for granted must be pursued. Efforts become arduous but aimless and responses are contrived. Ball (2012) writes about “a growing sense of ontological insecurity; both a loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do” (p. 20), which he attributes to the neoliberalization of universities. In summary, the current model is ill-equipped to solely address the activities of higher education. This exploratory case study adds to the growing corpus of research that shows rumblings in the academic community. By applying a post-structuralist lens to the quality assurance discourses and drawing from some of Foucault’s work on power, governance, and discourse, this study hopes to inspire new ways to conceptualize quality. Educational leaders need to be more reflexive of how meanings are socially constructed and how the discourse influences their work. Post-structuralist discourse analysis is one way educational leaders can adopt a reflexive mode of operation (Anderson & Mungal, 2015; Cabalin, 2015; Reid, 2009).

I return to the joke with which I started at the beginning of my thesis. One of the participants in this study shared a story about a fish who did not realize it was surrounded by water:

This reminds me of the joke about the two fish and they're swimming in the water. The big fish says to the little fish "How do you like the water?" The little fish says "Water?" That's all the fish knows.

Like the analogy of the little fish oblivious to the water that surrounds it, we may be unable to recognize the discursive and ideological environment that engulfs us. Those tasked to comply with a university quality assurance process may engage with the process without deeply contemplating underlying assumptions, and how those assumptions support a particular agenda. A key imperative for social science is to draw attention to that which proceeds unnoticed and unquestioned (Epstein, 2016). The fish anecdote is a metaphor for how pervasive quality assurance has become at universities. Educational leaders need to be more mindful of the discourses in which they swim. If we redefine the intention of quality assurance from control to *analysis* and refocus quality assurance processes from measurement to *action*, then there is an opportunity to revitalize educational moral aims and insert ethical considerations to all university academic endeavours. A university education is a complex and transformative life experience that cannot be completely quantified. In conclusion, a counter-discourse is needed to combat hegemonic neoliberal discourses that currently shape educational policies and quality assurance frameworks. I hope the findings from this study encourage educational leaders to reflect more on the discourses that impact their work and stimulate counter-discourses that foster new approaches for quality assurance in higher education.

Discourses are politically pliable, exemplify power dynamics, and operate beneath the dialogue in subtle yet profound ways. In the wake of growing concern in the academic

literature and the observation that naturalized ideological discourse makes educational leaders complacent, we need to make a call for change. This study encourages present-day educational leaders at universities to re-examine the premises of quality assurance. The findings from this study challenge the presumptions held by governments and external accreditation agencies and perhaps educational leaders themselves that everyone already knows what constitutes academic quality. The research hopes to prompt educational leaders to engage in seeking creative, new frameworks for quality assurance.

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Appendix A: Research Ethics Approval (Western)



**Western
Research**

Research Ethics

Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice

Principal Investigator: Dr. Rita Gardiner
Department & Institution: Education\Faculty of Education, Western University

NMREB File Number: 109418
Study Title: An exploratory case study of a quality assurance process at an Ontario university

NMREB Initial Approval Date: July 06, 2017
NMREB Expiry Date: July 06, 2018

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

Document Name	Comments	Version Date
Western University Protocol	Received June 22, 2017	
Instruments	Interview Guide. Received June 7, 2017.	
Letter of Information & Consent		2017/06/21
Recruitment Items	Telephone Script	2017/06/21
Recruitment Items	Email Script	2017/06/21

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.


Ethics Officer, on behalf of Dr. Riley Munson, NMREB Chair or delegated board member

EO: Erika Basile ___ Grace Kelly Katelyn Harris ___ Nicola Morphet ___ Karen Gopaul ___ Patricia Sargeant ___

Appendix B: Email Script for Recruitment of Participants

Project Title: An exploratory case study of quality assurance in higher education at an Ontario university in Ontario

Email Script for Recruitment

Subject Line: Invitation to participate in research

You are being invited to participate in a study that we are conducting on the notion of ‘quality’ as it pertains to quality assurance in higher education. Your experiences and insights will be extremely valuable to this study.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will participate in a single interview that will last between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview will take place at a location convenient for you. In the interview, you will be asked to share your insights regarding the notion of ‘quality’ as it relates to the quality assurance process in higher education based on your administrative role at this university.

Attached to this email you will find the *Letter of Information and Consent* for you to review. If you would like more information on this study, please contact the researcher at the contact information given below.

Principal Investigator + Contact

Dr. Rita Gardiner, Assistant Professor
Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education
Western University

Doctoral Student

Grase Kim, EdD Candidate (expected graduation 2019)
Faculty of Education
Western University

Thank you,

Grase Kim and Dr. Rita Gardiner

Appendix C: Letter of Information and Consent



Letter of Information and Consent

Project Title: An exploratory case study of quality assurance in higher education at one university in Ontario

Principal Investigator + Contact

Dr. Rita Gardiner, Assistant Professor
Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education
Western University

Doctoral Student

Grase Kim, EdD Candidate
Western University (expected graduation 2019)

Invitation to Participate

You are invited to participate in a research study about the notion of ‘quality’ as it relates to university quality assurance. I am contacting you because you are working in a position that engages in the quality assurance process at this institution.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will participate in a single interview that will last between 45 and 60 minutes. In the interview, you will be asked to share your insights regarding the notion of ‘quality’ as it relates to the quality assurance process at this university.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this study is to explore how the notion ‘quality’ is defined in university quality assurance documents and by key stakeholders, namely faculty and staff whose work is directly related to the quality assurance process at this university.

What are the study procedures?

All semi-structured interviews (one per participant) will be audio recorded. For data quality reasons, audio recording is mandatory. The researcher would also like to use voice transcription software (Google Docs) to produce preliminary interview transcripts. The audio recordings will be used to refine the initial voice transcriptions. I will be asking you to comment on your own definitions of ‘quality’ as it relates to the quality assurance process at this institution. Interview information transcribed in Google Docs will not be identifiable. Voice transcription is optional and without your consent will not be used. The interview will take place at on campus or

nearby off-campus at a location convenient for you, for example, your office, coffee shop, meeting room, etc.

What are the risks and harms of participating in this study?

There are no known or anticipated risks or discomforts associated with participating in this study.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

You may not directly benefit from participating in this study, however, information gathered may provide benefits to society as a whole. The exploration of meanings and assumptions associated with the notion ‘quality’ may better inform key stakeholders and others interested in higher education.

Can participants choose to leave the study?

If you decide to withdraw from the study, you have the right to request withdrawal of information collected about you. If you wish to have your information removed, please let the us know in writing and we will delete all data we have collected with you.

How will participants’ information be kept confidential?

All data collected will remain confidential and accessible only to the investigators of this study. All data will be kept safely stored in the office of the doctoral student and all electronic data files will be password protected and encrypted. Data with identifiable information will be kept for five years in accordance with Western University policy. After five years, it will be destroyed.

If the results are published, your name will not be used. Neither will we use any other information that could identify you (e.g. we will not use the name of this institution). If you choose to leave this study, your data will be removed and destroyed from our database.

While we do our best to protect your information, there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which may be required to be reported by law, we have a duty to report.

Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may contact you or require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

Are participants compensated to be in this study?

There will be no compensation.

What are the rights of participants?

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decide not to be in this study. Even if you consent to participate in the study, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose not to participate or to leave the study at any time, it will have no effect on your employment. We will give you new information that is

learned during the study that might affect your decision to stay in the study. You do not waive any legal right by signing the consent form.

Whom do participants contact for questions?

If you require any further information regarding this research project or your participation in the study, you may contact the Principal Investigator, Dr. Rita Gardiner, Assistant Professor.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study, you may contact The Office of Human Research Ethics at Western University.

Consent

Please sign the attached consent form to indicate that you agree to participate in this study. Please return the consent form to Grase Kim.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration of this study.

Sincerely,

Grase Kim
EdD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Western University

Dr. Rita Gardiner, Assistant Professor
Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education, Western University
Althouse College, FEB room 1079

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

Consent Form

Project Title: An exploratory case study of quality assurance in higher education at one university in Ontario

Principal Investigator + Contact

Dr. Rita Gardiner, Assistant Professor
Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education
Western University

Doctoral Student

Grase Kim, EdD Candidate
Western University (expected graduation 2019)

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to be audio recorded in this research

YES NO

I agree to the use of voice transcription in this research

YES NO

I consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during the study in the dissemination of this research

YES NO

Print Name of Participant

Signature

Date (DD-MMM-YYYY)

Person obtaining consent

My signature means that I have explained the study to the participant named above. I have answered all questions.

Print Name of Person
Obtaining Consent

Signature

Date (DD-MMM-YYY)

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

Project Title: An exploratory case study of quality assurance in higher education at one university in Ontario

Principal Investigator + Contact

Dr. Rita Gardiner, Assistant Professor
Critical Policy, Equity and Leadership Studies
Faculty of Education
Western University

Doctoral Student

Grase Kim, EdD Candidate (expected graduation 2019)
Faculty of Education
Western University

Interview Protocol

Date:

Time:

Participant #:

Location:

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. In this interview, I will ask you questions related to what the notion of ‘quality’ means to you in the context of quality assurance at universities.

RE-CONFIRM INFORMED CONSENT

I want you to know that your participation is voluntary. Even if you consent to participate, you have the right to not answer individual questions or to withdraw from the study at any time.

Before we begin with the questions, I just want to reiterate that an audio recorder will be used during the interview. I will also use a laptop with voice transcription software if you are comfortable with this. All interview transcripts will be de-identified and all data will be kept confidential. Any quotes used in the written report of this study will be anonymized.

At this time, please re-confirm your consent to participate in the interview, the use of recording devices, and the use of de-identified quotes in the written report for this study.

PROCEDURES

The interview will last approximately one hour and will include a series of questions.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

OK. Let's begin...

QUESTIONS

1. You have been selected to participate in this study because of your familiarity with this institution's quality assurance process. Please tell me about your general impressions of the quality assurance process at this university.

Probe: In your administrative role, what are some of the ways that you respond to the requests associated with the quality assurance process?

2. Based on your own observations and impressions, what do you think is meant by the term 'quality' in the current context of quality assurance at universities?
3. If you could redefine 'quality' for quality assurance, what would your definition of 'quality' look like?

Probe: For instance, what considerations (if any) do you think are missing in the current approach to quality assurance?

OK. I am now going to ask you about six principles, which Barnett and Parry used to guide them in their study of quality assurance system in the UK in the 1990s. I would like you to tell me, in your opinion, if you think these principles are relevant to quality assurance at this university and if yes, how so. Please offer any examples that come to mind.

4. In your view, how is the principle of transparency relevant to quality assurance?
5. How do you interpret the principle of partnerships in relation to the quality assurance?
6. What are your thoughts on the principle of justice as it may connect to academic quality?
7. How does the principle of appropriateness relate to quality assurance?
8. In your opinion, what do quality and rigour relate to the current quality assurance process?
9. In what ways do you see ethics relevant to academic quality?
10. Those are all my questions. Do you have any other thoughts related to the notion of 'quality' as it pertains to quality assurance that you would like to share with me?

END OF INTERVIEW

This concludes our interview. Over the next few weeks I will be finalizing the transcripts of today's interview. I will send you a copy of the transcript to check if I accurately captured your responses. Also, at the end of the study, I would be happy to send you a summary of the key findings. Would you like to receive a summary? [The researcher will record "yes" or "no" for sending a summary of key findings]. Thank you again for your time.

Curriculum Vitae

Grase Kim

EDUCATION

Edd in Educational Leadership

2015-2019

University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada

Dissertation title: An exploratory case study of quality assurance in higher education at an Ontario university with a Foucault-informed post-structuralist discourse analysis

Public Lecture: November 9, 2018

MSc in Rural Extension Studies

1996-1999

University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada

BA in Psychology

1989-1994

University of Guelph
Guelph, Ontario, Canada

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Assistant Dean, Academic Programs

2013-present

Faculty of Nursing

- Provide high-level administrative and policy support for the execution of divisional goals
- Monitor and respond to changes in regulatory requirements and institutional guidelines that impact the delivery of academic programs
- Serve on the Faculty Council standing committee for undergraduate academic appeals, graduate department academic appeals committee, and ad hoc working groups

York University Senior Management Internship Program

2012-2013

HR Learning and Organizational Development

- *Faculty of Graduate Studies:* Consolidated data for a year-to-year financial analysis of student funding by Faculty
- *Office of Integrated Resource Planning:* Reviewed Integrated Resource Plans related to a proposed new activity-based budget model
- *Office of Institutional Research & Analysis:* Summarized the findings of five national student surveys

Director, Academic Affairs, Student Services, and Operations

2006-2012

Faculty of Education

- Managed workflow related to administrative support for the delivery of undergraduate and graduate programs, including inquiries, admissions, course offering, petitions, appeals, registration, grades, academic advising, practicum placements, new program proposals, and accreditation
- Acted as secretary for the Faculty of Education's admission and petitions/awards committees, ex-officio member of the curriculum committee, member to various pan-university committees (enrolment management group, Registrar's Roundtable, Retention Council)
- Hired and trained managerial and support staff

Assistant Director, Undergraduate Programs, Student Services

2000-2006

School of Business

- Organized student recruitment activities
- Hired and trained support staff, service bursary students, volunteer student ambassadors

Associate Registrar, Student Recruitment

1998-2000

Community College

- Developed student recruitment strategies, including events, phone campaign, communications (e.g. viewbook, acknowledgement letter, offers, etc.)
- Hired and trained support staff as well as work-study students and campus tour guides