

Quality Assurance Management, Cégeps and Vanier College

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February 2019

Abstract

Since the mid-1990s, the management of Cégeps has been shaped by a particular overriding approach to organizational management. The approach is grounded in thinking and theorizing about the operations of commercial enterprises and how to make them run more effectively and competitively. The focal concept of this specialist thinking and theorizing is “quality”. Embedded within this quality-based approach to organizational management is the notion, mechanism and objective of “quality assurance”. Since the 1990s, quality assurance has come to stand, on its own, for an entire managerial approach and ethos in higher education worldwide. In Québec, the *Commission d’Évaluation de l’Enseignement collégial* (CEEC), is the self-defined “quality assurance organization” overseeing the integration of quality assurance managerial principles and practices in Cégeps. In 2013, this oversight role was intensified and expanded with the launch of the CEEC’s “quality assurance process”, an undertaking that would further entrench the quality assurance model into Cégep institutional management. This has been met with responses, on the part of teacher unions and many teachers, ranging from critical concern to outright opposition. This paper examines the quality assurance managerial project in the Cégep sector and highlights critical and oppositional responses to it.

Summary

In May 2014, the Cégep teachers union federation, FNEEQ, issued an “Action Plan” to all union locals aimed at countering the “quality assurance process”. This was a significant occurrence. The “Action Plan” called on union locals to organize activities and take action against a major undertaking of the *Commission d’Évaluation de l’Enseignement collégial* (CEEC), the legislatively constituted body which regulates and oversees managerial practice within Cégeps. The “Plan” sought to mobilize teachers and their syndical associations to stand in opposition to the CEEC, its recently launched audit process and its wider project of instituting a new managerial regime of “quality assurance” in the college system.

The CEEC launched the “quality assurance process” in 2013. It was a six-year undertaking encompassing all Cégeps and entailing an evaluation (or audit) of each Cégep’s “quality assurance system”—an organization-wide arrangement of managerial practices, instruments and structures aligned with the principles of “quality assurance” management. The evaluation verifies the extent to which, and the effectiveness with which, individual Cégeps have advanced their integration of the quality assurance approach into managerial planning, strategy and practice in their institution. It is also a means by which colleges would accelerate and deepen that integration.

The shift to the quality assurance managerial regime is not unique to Québec Cégeps. It is a development that has occurred in higher education systems worldwide since the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The oppositional stance of Québec Cégep teacher unions to the entrenchment of the quality-assurance managerial regime in Cégeps is also not unique. Educators and teacher unions worldwide have been critical of the move to manage higher education according to this managerial ethos and they have taken steps to resist it in various ways.

Opposition to the quality assurance managerial project in higher education is expressed in terms of a number of common concerns and criticisms. Among these concerns are that quality assurance management threatens and erodes a number of interconnected and valued principles and norms of higher education. These include: the autonomy of academic departments; academic liberty in research and teaching; a vision of education as intrinsically, rather than instrumentally, valuable; security of employment; workplace relations commensurate with dignity and mutual respect; a conception of “quality” in the teaching craft that is not reduced to quantitative indicators of performance; the determination of workplace norms, with respect to such things as managerial purview, through the collective-bargaining process.

This paper examines the integration of a quality assurance approach into management practice in Québec Cégeps since the mid-1990s, approximately, with particular attention to Vanier College. It also assesses the implications and effects of this managerial turn. The paper’s purpose is to widen and deepen understanding of this change in institutional management with a view to generating discussion on it and better coordinating and directing responses to it.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: Setting and Background p. 3
2. The FNEEQ “Action Plan” to Counter the “Quality Assurance Process” p. 7
3. The Institutional-Organizational Setting p. 10
4. Quality Assurance in Québec Colleges and the “Quality Assurance Process” p. 13
5. Concerns, Objections and Opposition p. 15
6. Conclusion p. 21

1. Introduction: Setting and Background

This paper addresses the integration of “quality assurance” (QA) processes, principles and strategies into managerial practice in Québec Cégeps with a focus on Vanier College. “Quality assurance” has to do with organizational management. It is, variously and at once, an approach, a model, a strategy or method, an objective (or set of objectives) of managerial practice within an organization. Irrespective of the specific form it takes or how it is conceived as a component of management, its core idea is that the organization must function with a view to systematically and continuously assessing the quality of the product it is producing or the service it is offering and delivering. This assessment of quality is undertaken for several key organizational purposes: *prevention* (preventing problems that may negatively affect quality and, therefore, client/user satisfaction); *attainment* (attaining a “quality” standard in production and service and, therefore, meeting the satisfaction desires of clients or users) and *augmentation* (increasing the level of product or service quality – understood as “improvement” - and the level of client or user satisfaction). Further, it is assumed that this systematic activity of assessment will assure or guarantee product or service quality.

The notion of “quality assurance” originates in theories and models of management developed in reference to commercial and private enterprise, such as “Quality Management” and “Total Quality Management”. The earliest full elaborations of these theories date to the 1950s in the works of several key management thinkers from the USA. In the course of theoretical development, the concept of “quality assurance” was integrated as a component of the set of organizational activities, operations and processes that had to be undertaken to achieve quality and, thereby, achieve organizational objectives like competitive advantage, acceptable profit margins and so on. However, over time, “quality assurance” has come to stand, on its own, for an entire managerial approach. This is notably the case

with the adoption of the “quality” paradigm in management in higher education and in public sector organizations worldwide.

In the literature on the “quality” managerial approach, theorists and specialists of management, as well as regulatory and consultancy bodies, and others, have defined “quality” in various terms. One influential “quality management” thinker has proposed that differing notions of quality may be summed up by the common definition of “meeting the customer’s requirements” (Oakland and Morris, 1998, 2). Whatever the specific definition, “quality”, in organizations operating according to a quality managerial logic, is conceived and treated as something that is measured and measurable. As such, it is understood to be a feature or a property of something – a product or service – if that something is found, by means of measurement, to adequate to the standard or criterion set as the indicator (or the “benchmark”). The commensurability of the product or service to the indicator is usually represented as a quantity or in quantitative terms as a score, a rating, a ranking and so on.

This conception of quality as a measurable property of a product or service is the one that most closely resembles what is found in quality-assurance-based management. In higher education, managing according to quality assurance principles entails a resort to practices of measuring quality according to “whether education achieves explicitly stated criteria for performance” (Kinser, 2014, 57). This is described as a “practical, standards based” understanding of quality (Idem.). In taking account of how consideration is given to quality in education, the quality assurance conception of quality is often compared to and contrasted against understandings that represent quality as having to do with either “fitness for purpose” or “fitness of purpose” (Idem.). Both of these latter understandings address the congruence between, on one hand, various educational undertakings within educational institutions, and, on the other, mission objectives of education as defined by institutions or as conceived at a societal level (Idem.). In some accounts, these understandings are seen to be less amenable or entirely unamenable to quantitative measuring. The specific terms of a dictionary-type definition of “quality” used in a regime of quality assurance management in an institution or a system of higher education, is, in itself, not sufficiently telling of the workings or the implications of that managerial regime. Rather, in accounting for the implications, what must be looked at is the managerial structure and the set of techniques and strategies deployed for examining and assessing quality. In Québec, the regulatory body overseeing quality assurance management in Cégeps, the *Commission d’Évaluation de l’Enseignement collégial* (CEEC), in a reference publication from 2013, defined “quality” as *adéquation aux objectifs* (“commensurability with objectives” or “correspondence to objectives”) (CEEC, *Systèmes*, 12). More

tellingly, however, this definition is explained as meaning the capacity of an educational establishment to attain its objectives and achieve its mission (*...la capacité pour un établissement d'atteindre ses objectifs et de réaliser sa mission*) (Idem.) The key term here is “capacity” and the key consideration is how “capacity” is to be examined, evaluated and determined, a matter to which the publication attends at some length.

The adoption of quality assurance processes, principles and strategies in the carrying out of managerial activities at Vanier College has become especially evident since the coming into effect, in 2017-18, of a new College policy for Program evaluation in the form of the “Program Management Policy” (PMP).¹ This is so because, more than any other instrument used in institutional management at Vanier, the PMP incorporates and deploys the techniques, aims and language of quality assurance management. In this respect, the Policy’s adoption may be seen as a signal development in the turn towards quality assurance management that has been underway in the institution since the mid- to late-1990s. This turn has been gradual and incremental, yet steady. That is, prior to the introduction of the PMP, there had been moves and undertakings at the level of institutional management at Vanier that were consistent with the advancement of a quality assurance managerial project. In most instances, these changes in managerial practice and form have been mandated or recommended by the Cégep sector’s quality assurance regulatory and oversight body, the CEEC, mentioned above and discussed further below.

These changes in institutional management at Vanier are not exceptional or unique, but, rather, are in accordance with a plan, favoured within government in Québec, to reform managerial practice in the Cégep system in line with management principles and processes congruent with the “quality” paradigm. This, in turn, is not unique to the Québec education system but is consistent with a tendency in higher education management worldwide. Notably, this tendency interacts and intersects with an approach to governing and government, by states, that is also deployed on a global scale and is known as “neo-liberalism” or “neo-liberal government”. In concrete terms, some examples of managerial practices, instruments and processes integrated into Québec Cégeps to embed and advance a quality approach include the introduction of regulatory instruments like institutional “strategic plans”², the policies to

¹ The Program Management Policy was approved by the Board of Directors at its meeting of 13 June 2017 (Vanier College, 13 June 2017, 2).

² Pursuant to an amendment, in 2002, of the Law governing the CEEC (Law C-32.2), the CEEC was mandated to undertake the evaluation of institutional “strategic plans” within the Cégep network (Section 13.4). Interestingly, this particular evaluation role was assumed by the CEEC in conjunction with an amendment, also in 2002, to the *Loi*

evaluate student learning (known as PIEA in the French Cégep sector and IPESA in the English sector)³, the adoption of a “systems” style organizational design and the introduction of various instruments for assessing and measuring quality in teaching and program delivery.

The Program Management Policy has been the object of much discussion and attention among teachers at Vanier since its introduction and subsequent adoption by the College administration. Owing to the scope and breadth of its application – it applies to the management of all College programs and, by extension, bears on the affairs of all academic departments - it has wide implications for teachers and departments. This is so, both in respect of the everyday of teaching and departmental coordination and in respect of the place and status of teachers, departments and disciplines in college institutions and in higher education in Québec more generally. This paper, then, addresses this shift in colleges towards explicit, formalized management according to quality assurance principles. It has three main aims:

- (a) to account for the adoption, in the Québec Cégep system, of a managerial approach based on quality assurance principles, methods and modalities;
- (b) to bring to greater light some of the implications for teaching and teachers at Vanier of a deepening and expansion of a managerial approach grounded in quality assurance principles and procedures.;
- (c) to offer a critical assessment of the effects of quality assurance management in higher education, in general, and in the Québec Cégep system, in particular.

The text proceeds in four main parts.

First, it gives an account of the trajectory of some key actions and developments over the past four to five years that have shaped the circumstances of the current juncture where quality assurance management in Cégeps and, in particular, at Vanier College, are concerned. The starting point of this account is the issuance of the FNEEQ “Action Plan” to counter the “quality assurance process”.

Second, it presents a sketch of the prevailing institutional-organizational setting of debate and action, in Québec, with respect to quality assurance and its adoption in college management.

sur les Collèges d'Enseignement Général et Professionnel (C-29). This latter amendment stipulates, specifically, that each college must establish an institutional “Strategic Plan” and submit a copy of it to both the Ministry and the CEEC (Section 16.1). Later, in 2008, the CEEC set out the process and parameters for the evaluation of institutional Strategic Plans (CEEC, *Plans stratégiques*, 2008).

³ Since the adoption of these evaluation policies was made mandatory in 1993 under the *Règlement sur le Régime d'Études Collégiales* (RRAC), they have been the object of several rounds of evaluation launched by the CEEC.

Third, it looks briefly at the actual and further integration, into institutions (with a focus on Vanier), of a managerial approach and ethos centered on quality assurance. Notably, attention is paid to the CEEC's process (since 2013-14) of evaluation of "quality assurance systems" in Cégeps.

Fourth, and finally, there will be a more focused consideration of some key concerns and objections raised about the deployment of this managerial model and style in higher education institutions. Specifically, these concerns will be considered insofar as they are manifest in developments in college education in Québec at two levels of context: the macro level and the micro level.

2. The FNEEQ "Action Plan" to Counter the "Quality Assurance Process"

In May 2014, the VCTA's union federation, FNEEQ (*Fédération nationale des Enseignantes et Enseignants du Québec*), adopted an "Action Plan" (*Plan d'Action*) focused on quality assurance management in Cégeps. The specific object of attention and concern of the "Plan" was something called the "quality assurance process" (*processus de l'assurance qualité*). In respect of this process the "Plan" sought to provide a set of guidelines for action, at the level of the Province and at the level of union locals, aimed at countering the CEEC's "quality assurance process" (*...contrer le processus d'assurance qualité de la CEEC*)⁴. In its analysis, its assertions and its call to action, the "Plan" had wide-ranging implications for Québec college teachers, their workplace conditions and their profession. It was, in fact, a signal intervention on the part of FNEEQ insofar as relations are concerned between college teachers and administrations and between college unions and the Québec state. This is so for several reasons:

1. The "Plan" was focused specifically and explicitly on a central undertaking (namely the "quality assurance process") of the CEEC, the legislatively constituted and state-funded body overseeing managerial practice and procedure in Québec Cégeps;
2. The "Plan" called on union locals and their memberships to oppose this CEEC undertaking and to critically observe, monitor and assess developments in their colleges that signalled the further integration of quality assurance principles into managerial strategy, structure and ethos;
3. The "Plan" raised specific and explicit concerns about the shift, in Québec college institutions, to a managerial model that gives primacy to strategies, operational modalities and objectives associated with the "quality assurance" concept;

⁴ See Section 3, below, for more on the CEEC.

4. The “Plan” raised concerns about the role of the CEEC, a formally constituted quality assurance body, in the Québec college system, to the point of calling for its abolition (FNEEQ, “Plan”, 2).

In the Fall of 2014, the VCTA began organizing and planning in response to the “Action Plan”.⁵ Soon afterwards, however, attention and effort turned to mobilization during Collective Agreement negotiations in 2015-16.⁶ Subsequently, in 2016-17, the VCTA as well as teachers and departments at Vanier College devoted much effort to the examination and analysis of a draft of a new policy, and accompanying procedures, on program management. The policy, named the Program Management Policy (PMP), was drafted by and was issued from the College’s “Academic Policy Advisory Committee”, a sub-committee of the Academic Council.⁷ The release of the draft was accompanied by a consultation in which feedback was requested from all College constituencies. Study and discussion of the proposal, among teachers, as well as the preparation of commentary and feedback on it, spanned much of that academic year.⁸

The PMP was introduced as a mechanism by and through which processes and practices commensurate with a quality assurance managerial model would be incorporated into the organization in a comprehensive manner. Indeed, its introduction and deployment represented a specific and precise instance of an organization-wide application of quality assurance principles, concepts and modalities. This application was to be achieved by focusing QA management on programs of study, and, effectively, on the entire academic sector, the core sector of the organization and its activities. Inasmuch as the policy aimed at the further entrenchment of a “quality management” logic within the institution, it fell within the scope of actions and objects to which, in the terms of the FNEEQ “Action Plan”, teachers and departments were to pay critical attention and were to take steps to counter and prevent. In the “Plan’s” own terms, union locals were to take action to prevent any transformation of institutional policies in accordance with the managerial aim of the continuous improvement of quality (*[e]mpêcher le*

⁵ The VCTA had, earlier, passed a motion relating to quality assurance at a General Assembly in March 2013. The motion moved that “no Vanier teacher be involved in the implementation of any mechanism related to Quality Assurance.” (VCTA, 13 March 2013).

⁶ It is notable that quality assurance management in colleges was integrated into both employer and union demands during Collective Agreement negotiations, for, needless to say, different reasons and aims.

⁷ This sub-committee was formed in March 2016. It is noteworthy that its formation was the object of a Grievance (*Grief*) filed by the Vanier College Teachers Association with its union federation (FNEEQ). The Grievance, dated 12 December 2016, was filed under article 10-1.07 of the Collective Agreement 2015-2020 regarding the appointment of professors to College committees. It states that in forming the Policy Advisory Committee, the College failed to ask the VCTA to appoint the teacher members (VCTA, “Formulaire”, 12 December 2016).

⁸ Initially, the consultation period was from 13 October 2016 to 19 December 2016. Pursuant to requests from Departments for a longer consultation period, the deadline for feedback was extended to 11 May 2017.

détournement des processus départementaux et des politiques institutionnelles aux fins de la gestion de l'amélioration continue de la qualité) (FNEEQ, "Plan", 2014). The notion of "continuous improvement" is central to quality management. Owing to its conceptual and operational link to client satisfaction and to an organizational calculus focused on competitiveness and the financial bottom line, it has been greeted haltingly, if not disapprovingly, by educators in higher education institutions and by teacher unions.

It is important to note that the key contextual element that led to the FNEEQ "Action Plan" in 2014 was the CEEC's launch, in 2013, of a new process aimed at the evaluation of practices and policies that individual Cégeps put in place for evaluating their own activities and guaranteeing quality (CEEC, "Communiqué", 2013, 2).⁹ Now, in 2018-19, that element of context has not changed. Indeed, the CEEC audit process is continuing and Vanier College is scheduled for the audit visit in Autumn 2019 (CEEC, "Planification", 1). Meanwhile, the College administration has taken steps in preparation for the audit. For instance, it has introduced, instituted or revised processes and instruments geared to the gathering and generation of information (e.g. data on courses). It has also introduced greater degrees of standardization in practices integral to the organization (e.g. in some facets of pedagogical assessment) and has taken measures to carry out the continuous evaluation of the organization's focal activity (namely education) consistent with the aim of assuring quality. The most notable of these preparatory steps was the introduction of the "Program Management Policy" (PMP).¹⁰ Like other managerial instruments of this type, the PMP functions as a kind of "super mechanism" for assuring the quality of programs. As such, it intersects with several criteria of the CEEC's evaluative approach such as assuring the effectiveness, relevance and coherence of academic programs (CEEC, *Systèmes*, 20-23).¹¹ Therefore, the kinds of guiding actions presented in the "Action Plan" in respect of the CEEC "quality assurance process" remain pertinent. Additionally, with the implantation of the PMP as a management framework based on key quality assurance notions like the "continuous improvement of quality", teachers must

⁹ The original *Communiqué* states: *L'audit mené par la Commission évalue...la capacité du système d'assurance qualité et de la gestion qui en est faite à garantir la qualité dans les différentes dimensions de la mission des collèges.*

¹⁰ The connection between the PMP and the CEEC audit was made explicitly at the time of the adoption of the PMP at the Board of Directors (see BOD, Minutes, 13 June 2017). That is, the PMP was said to have been introduced in preparation for the audit.

¹¹ In the CEEC's first reference document on the institutional audit, the first component in the evaluation of the effectiveness of quality mechanisms includes the criterion "the effectiveness of mechanisms" (*[l']efficacité des mécanismes*). Several sub-criteria fall under this component including the effectiveness of mechanisms which assure the pertinence, coherence and effectiveness of Programs. Thus, in one instance, this amounts to the evaluation of the effectiveness of mechanisms that assure the effectiveness of Programs (CEEC, *Systèmes*, 2013, 22).

proceed critically and cautiously with respect to both the audit and the PMP itself. Both these latter, in different ways, are strategically significant to the aim of deepening and expanding quality assurance principles and processes in managerial practice at Vanier and in the Cégep system. Owing to their tendency to introduce new forms of managerial oversight and coordination throughout the organization, in the name of quality attainment, control and improvement, it is important for teachers to maintain a critical outlook and to act to forestall the (further) erosion of principles, values and aspirations considered as integral to the mission of higher education. These include, for example, the autonomy of departments, academic freedom, inter-peer deliberation and solidarity, the independence of institutions and the intrinsic worth of education (as opposed to its utilitarian worth or its market worth).

3. The Institutional-Organizational Setting

An appreciation of the implications and effects of the quality assurance managerial project being deployed and advanced in the Québec Cégep system must account for the configuration of the institutional-organizational setting. The central organizational set-up in the arena of decision and action with respect to quality assurance management in Québec colleges is comprised of the following actors: Cégeps, the CEEC, the Québec state and teacher unions. Cégeps are the institutional sites in which the quality assurance managerial project is being implemented. The CEEC is the organizational body promoting, overseeing and assessing that implementation. The Québec state is the institutional instance mandating and authorizing the oversight body (the CEEC) and providing financial and much ideological support for the implantation of quality assurance management in the college system. Moreover, and importantly, it is also the source of funding for public colleges and it plays a determinant role in providing (or withdrawing) legal, political and ideological support for the existence of the college system in its current form in Québec. Teacher unions and union federations occupy positions of critical observation, examination and assessment with respect to the effects and implications of the quality assurance project in colleges. They also organize and support actions on the part of college teachers in the face of the further implementation of the QA managerial model in institutions. Additionally, they play a key role in determining managerial purview and defining relations between teachers and managers in institutions through the exercise of their representational mandate on behalf of teachers (as, for instance, in representing teacher interests in Collective Agreement negotiations).

Owing to the key role of the CEEC within this institutional-organizational set-up, it is important to look more closely at it from the standpoint of its mandate and initiatives.

The CEEC, or the *Commission d'Évaluation de l'Enseignement collégial*, is a public organization created by the Québec government in 1993 for the stated purpose of evaluating college education in Québec. Under the law that created the CEEC, the *Loi sur la Commission d'Évaluation de l'Enseignement collégial* of 15 June 1993, this evaluation mandate was focused on the following organizational instruments and guidelines: (a) institutional policies for the evaluation of learning and for the evaluation of Programs; (b) the objectives and standards of Programs established by the Ministry or by a Cégep itself (Québec, *Loi sur la Commission*, 1993, Section 13). In this Law (and in subsequent amended versions), the CEEC is not defined explicitly as a quality assurance organization or as having a mandate to evaluate an institution's quality assurance managerial processes and practices. Indeed, in the text of the Law the word "quality" appears only once. Specifically, it appears in reference to what the CEEC may recommend in the carrying out of its mandate. That is, in its evaluation reports to college institutions, the CEEC may recommend measures to increase or enhance (*rehausser*) the quality of the college's evaluation policies or of its programs or its means of implementing programs (Québec, *Loi sur la Commission*, 1993, Section 17).

Thus, the Commission's mandate, initially, was not defined explicitly as that of evaluating a mode of institutional management - namely, quality assurance management - in Québec Cégeps. Indeed, in its first major evaluative undertaking after its creation in 1993, the Commission focused on the evaluation of colleges' policies on the evaluation of student learning (known as PIEA or *Politiques institutionnelles d'Évaluation des Apprentissages*).¹² It launched this evaluation process in mid-1994 following the mandatory adoption, by colleges, of these learning evaluation instruments. In its first report on the process, no mention is made of "quality assurance". Furthermore, these learning evaluation policies are not identified explicitly as components or mechanisms of a managerial system oriented to the maintenance and assurance of quality.¹³ In the report, the concern with "quality" is mentioned in reference to the stated aim of the CEEC's evaluation of the policy, namely that of determining the

¹² In English language Cégeps these policies are known as the "Institutional Policy on the Evaluation of Student Achievement" (IPESA).

¹³ In contrast, in the reference document issued in conjunction with the quality assurance audit/evaluation process launched in 2013, the learning evaluation policies (PIEA and IPESA) are identified as quality assurance mechanisms and as mechanisms operationalized by mechanisms. In fact, they are qualified as "main institutional mechanisms" (CEEC, *Evaluating*, 2015, 62, 64) (*principaux mécanismes institutionnels*) (CEEC, *Systèmes*, 2015, 62, 64, 67).

policy's general level of quality (*[l]e niveau général de qualité des politiques institutionnelles d'évaluation des apprentissages.*) (CEEC, *Politiques institutionnelles*, 1, 5, 6). As such, at this early stage in its history, the CEEC did not, explicitly and consciously, define its evaluation activities with respect to Cégeps as those of a quality assurance oversight or regulatory body charged with evaluating the implementation of evaluation practices and processes aimed at the continuous improvement of quality.

Subsequently, however, and especially since 2007,¹⁴ the CEEC's function and role shifted to that of an oversight body with respect to the introduction and implementation of quality assurance managerial practices, systems and structures in colleges and, importantly, the evaluation of those practices, systems and structures. It is noteworthy that in the 2014 document marking its twentieth anniversary, the CEEC describes itself specifically and explicitly as "a quality assurance organization": "the Commission is a public and independent quality-assurance organization whose mission is to contribute to and demonstrate the development of the quality of college teaching" (author's translation) (*[l]a Commission est un organisme d'assurance qualité public et indépendant dont la mission est de contribuer au développement de la qualité de l'enseignement collégial et d'en témoigner*) (CEEC, *Culture d'Évaluation*, 7).

In self-defining as a quality assurance entity, the CEEC assumed a role and purpose in higher education not unlike that of regulatory and audit organizations (public and non-public) that were in existence in higher education systems elsewhere (in Canada and globally). Additionally, it became more clearly and definitively part of a worldwide orientation to manage higher education in accordance with a logic of quality assurance and with the principles and modalities of "quality management" more generally. As a further indication of the intention to make quality assurance a managerial orthodoxy in the Cégep system, in 2016 the Commission received international accreditation as a quality assurance body in higher education. The attainment of this accreditation necessitated that the Commission, itself, be evaluated on the quality of its practices as the evaluator of Québec colleges. The accrediting entity, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), found that the CEEC conformed with the established international standards for external quality assurance agencies in higher education, and accreditation was granted in November 2016. For the CEEC, the accreditation

¹⁴ In its *Plan stratégique* for the period 2007-2011, the *Commission* presented itself as a "public and independent quality assurance organization" (*un organisme d'assurance qualité public et indépendant*) (FNEEQ, "Métaévaluation", 8)

process was seen as contributing to the consolidation of the place of quality assurance in the college sector of the Québec education system (CEEC, “Communiqué”, November 2016).

In assuming the role of a quality assurance agency, the CEEC became engaged in evaluation activities of a particular kind, namely evaluating the managerial practices and systems of educational institutions that are designed and introduced, ostensibly, to assure quality in the provision of education to young people. Typically, in jurisdictions where quality assurance bodies have been set up in the education sector, teachers and teacher unions have raised concerns about their purview, purpose, powers and effects and have mounted oppositional actions and campaigns.¹⁵ The bases and content of some of these concerns will be addressed below (see Section 5).

4. Quality Assurance in Québec Colleges and the “Quality Assurance Process”

This brings us to the expression “quality assurance process”. This refers to a process of evaluation or audit launched by the CEEC in the Spring of 2013. Evaluations or audits of quality by external bodies, like the CEEC, are intrinsic to quality-based management in the private and public sectors. They arise as part of a worldwide expansion of auditing practices (financial and otherwise) carried out with respect to organizations (including public-sector agencies) in the 1980s and 1990s, especially in states with economies organized along free-market lines. Quality assurance audits in higher education, much like auditing initiatives in other domains, are seen as having accountability purposes. That is, their emergence and widespread application were and are strategies for responding to demands of outside stakeholders (e.g. clients, users) for accountability on the part of producers and service providers (FNEEQ, “Métaévaluation”, 9; Kinser, 2014, 57). Additionally, and concurrently, external audits and evaluations, especially with respect to public service institutions, are seen to reflect a decline in trust, within populations, of public service provision and, more generally, the public sector and public services (Kinser, 2014, 57). This decline, however, should be seen as coincident with the rise, in western states in the first instance, of a particular mode of thinking, rationalizing and talking about the state – its purview and purpose - and about government and governing and their means and ends. This mode of thinking and calculating in relation to governing is called “neo-liberal” or “neo-liberalism”. Among other things, as an approach to governing, neo-liberalism has entailed the questioning of public-sector service

¹⁵ It is worth noting that senior managers of higher education institutions have sometimes been less than fully enthusiastic about the activities of these bodies. For instance, in 2001 the Vice-Chancellors of some leading UK universities raised objections about the inspection activities of the Quality Assurance Agency, culminating in the resignation of the Agency’s then Chief Executive (MacLeod, “Subject to Interference”, 2001).

provision and social insurance and the scaling-back of both. This questioning is often articulated in terms of efficiency, cost effectiveness and deficit reduction. Meanwhile, social programs associated with the “welfare state” are withdrawn or reduced in favour of inducing individual and collective dispositions inclined towards competitive strategizing, entrepreneurialism, individual success, self-reliance and other principles associated with and valued in classical liberalism and in free-market economic rationales.

The auditing operation entailed in the CEEC’s “quality assurance process” consists, specifically, in an evaluation of the effectiveness of what are called “quality assurance systems” (*systemes d’assurance qualité*) in the college *réseau*. A “quality assurance system” is described by the CEEC as follows: a structured and dynamic organization of different quality assurance mechanisms, including an information system, put into place by an institution/establishment with a view to assuring and attesting to the continuous improvement of quality (author’s translation) (CEEC, *Systèmes*, 12).¹⁶ “Quality assurance mechanisms” are at the heart of the quality assurance managerial logic and approach. They consist of a wide range of administrative instruments deployed in the management of an organization with the intention of assuring the quality of its product or service. In educational institutions, mechanisms can take the form of organization-wide policies, procedures and plans and, at a more focused level, of various kinds of specific documentary and regulatory tools and instruments such as plans, guides, profiles, reports and performance tables.

All institutions of the college *réseau* in Québec will be subject to this audit over the period of the process. The evaluation or audit process consists of several steps of which the main ones are: the carrying out of an institutional self-evaluation; the CEEC analysis of the college’s self-evaluation; the audit visit (*visite d’audit*) by CEEC officials.¹⁷ The CEEC then prepares an evaluation report in which it presents a judgment on the degree to which the audited college’s quality assurance mechanisms “guarantee” the continuous improvement of quality (Milot, “Assurance qualité” 2014; CEEC, “*Systèmes*”, 12). This process has been characterized as an instance of “meta-evaluation” wherein an evaluation is carried out of another evaluation or set of evaluation practices—namely, an evaluation of the mechanisms, practices and systems that are put in place to evaluate quality and that have already,

¹⁶ The original reads as follows: *l’organisation structure et dynamique des différents mécanismes d’assurance qualité, incluant un système d’information, mis en place par un établissement en vue d’assurer l’amélioration continue de la qualité, et d’en témoigner.*

¹⁷ The audit is described as being complementary to the self-evaluation but consists, basically, of an on-site assessment of the quality assurance mechanisms put in place by the institution prior to the actual visit (CEEC, *Systèmes*, 2013, 30)

themselves, been subject to evaluation (FNEEQ, “Métaévaluation”, 2013). It is seen as a process that is costly without comparable benefits, is overly bureaucratic and bureaucratizing and is often disregarding of the specialized knowledge and the everyday experience and regular self-evaluation of the front-line providers (i.e. teachers) of the organization’s “service” (Ibid., 11-13).

5. Concerns, Objections, Opposition

Concerns over the CEEC “quality assurance process” are presented explicitly in the FNEEQ “Action Plan” and reflect concerns and criticism expressed widely and consistently in other jurisdictions where quality management and quality assurance methods have been incorporated into managerial practice in higher education. Importantly, as a way of claiming its justificatory ground, the “Plan” signals the need to *defend* existing orientations in education in Québec (*orientations nationales*) in a context in which the CEEC is exercising governance functions in the college system. This defence, the FNEEQ “Action Plan” states, is based on respect for a number of principles. These latter are seen as fundamental both to the carrying out of professional responsibilities with dignity and respect and with a view to education’s socially meaningful impact. However, they are seen, also, as under threat by quality assurance management. The principles are: academic liberty or freedom; departmental and professional autonomy; respect for the work tasks and activities defined in the Collective Agreement; a conception of quality that extends beyond and is not limited to graduation and the earning of diplomas (*la diplomation*); the integrity of the college *réseau* and the *Diplôme d’Études collégiales* (FNEEQ, “Plan”, 1).

This assertion about the risk that quality assurance management represents for cornerstone principles of higher education, and of Cégep education specifically, is deserving of serious consideration. Indeed, it suggests that some core guiding beliefs, commitments and values of education are under threat or at risk. A thorough examination of the basis and implications of this possible erosion of the principles mentioned in the FNEEQ statement of concern is outside the scope of this paper. Yet, they should be taken into account in ensuing reflection, discussion and action with respect to the eventual CEEC audit at Vanier and with respect to steps taken by the College administration in preparation for and anticipation of the audit (e.g. the introduction of the PMP). For immediate purposes, it would be useful to try and grasp the relevance of the concerns highlighted in the “Action Plan” by looking at developments (actual and potential) to which they refer (directly and indirectly) at two levels of context: macro and micro. The macro context refers to conditions and circumstances at the *réseau* level and

beyond, including the international level. It considers the turn to quality management principles, most notably quality assurance, in educational management since the early- to mid-1990s. The micro context refers to developments and experiences within institutions, in the everyday, following and coincident with the deployment of a quality assurance managerial approach with particular reference to Québec.

5.1 The macro context of FNEEQ “Action Plan” concerns

First, at the macro level, quality assurance practices have been introduced in higher-education management in a context of the re-orientation of higher education in line with the principles and priorities of a neo-liberal approach to government and the management of national state affairs. This mode of governmental management, especially since the 1980s, came to guide actions, in western states in the first instance, in all domains of governmental purview. Among its key principles and priorities are reliance on and promotion of free-market processes in all facets of the operation of states and societies, the favouring of a competitive ethos across domains of social interaction, a general disavowal of the public provision of social insurance to mitigate social harms and costs to citizens (e.g. unemployment, illness) and a concomitant encouragement of individual self-reliance, strategic planning and the like for dealing with unwanted life circumstances and outcomes brought on by market processes and forces or by other circumstances and occurrences (e.g. job loss, precarious employment, illness, property damage).

The turn in managerial vision and approach in education, specifically, in this context of neo-liberal government, is observable on a global scale. Its launching point may be traced to a number of multi-lateral arrangements and agreements put in place in the European Union in the 1990s with a view to standardizing educational operations and quality assessment among its member states. Perhaps the most significant development in this regard was the issue of the “Bologna Declaration” in 1999 and the process to which it gave rise (known as the “Bologna process”)¹⁸. This inclination towards standardization emerged pursuant to the advent of what is now called the “internationalization” of higher education and, further, in conjunction with increased competition among universities to attract international students (Lacroix and Maheu, “Universités québécoises”, 6-9). Quality management, and, in particular, the objective of “quality assurance”, seemed to provide institutions with the managerial tools, processes and structures that would ensure their competitiveness in the increasingly

¹⁸ Among the objectives of European co-operation in higher education, as stated in the “Declaration”, is the following: “Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.” (EHEA, “Declaration”, 1999).

internationalized education market. However, beyond this concern with remaining competitive, it would appear that the global spread, institutionalization and formalization of quality management in education across national jurisdictions has had a uniformizing and normalizing effect whereby educational institutions are compelled to conform to the new managerial orthodoxy and to incorporate quality-based strategies and practices into their managerial approach.

Quality management, as a theory and model of organizational management, has its origins in thinking, planning and analysis of and for private sector commercial organizations, most notably after WWII. Yet, the deeper origins of quality-focused considerations in production are traced back to the very beginnings of commercial economic activity and a concern among producers and vendors with the quality of items produced whether agricultural and artisanal, in the first instance, and, later, industrial. However, fully-fledged models of organizational practice geared to quality concerns, such as “Total Quality Management”, are of more recent lineage. Quality-focused management is considered to have made important strides towards becoming a managerial standard after the production of some landmark theoretical works in the 1950s and 60s and, somewhat later, with the application of these theories in industry and, notably, in the Japanese auto industry. Subsequently, in the 1970s and 1980s, managerial practice within a quality paradigm changed in conjunction with changes in production patterns and methods. According to one account, shifts in markets in the latter part of the twentieth century towards a “client is king” ethos, created the context for the inclusion of quality assurance methods into management forms and for the extension and application of quality management beyond specific departments to the entirety of an organization (Canard, *Management*, 180-81).

Organizational management centered on “quality” – its attainment, maintenance, assurance, enhancement – was, thus, theorized in relation to the private sector and had its initial application in private enterprise. The extension of quality management to non-commercial organizational settings, like public-sector bodies, dates to the 1980s and 1990s. The influence of quality assurance thinking, within, more broadly, a quality-focused managerial approach, is seen to be connected to developments in international product standardization systems, among which those of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) are of particular consequence. In the view of one analyst of organizational management trends and practices, the expansion of the quality assurance model of management correlates with the developments in standardization in the late 1980s (Power, *Risk Management*, 26). Among the notable non-commercial areas into which the quality assurance model was exported, was

that of education, beginning in the UK where it has come to be most deeply, widely and enduringly entrenched (Lacroix and Maheu, “Universités québécoises”, 18-23).

Thus, the incorporation of quality management principles - particularly the assurance of quality -into education has its source in the private sector and in approaches to organizational management common to commercial enterprise with its focus on objectives such as profit maximization, market competitiveness, risk control, customer satisfaction and cost effectiveness. The concerns presented in the FNEEQ “Action Plan” reflect the view that a paradigm of organizational management grounded in commercial enterprise objectives and interests will have eroding effects on a certain approach to education’s purpose and *raison-d’être*. This approach posits education as a social good that should express a social project and should be supported by public financing. It also sees education’s purpose as tied to societal needs and wants such as well-being and life conditions commensurate with fairness, dignity and equality, in contrast to the needs, wants and interests of the market and corporations, for instance. It is worth noting that these concerns echo some of the criticisms directed at quality assurance systems in UK universities. Among these criticisms are excessive bureaucratization, managing with a view to meeting audit criteria and satisfying external audit priorities, distracting professionals from their core tasks (and directing them, instead, to meeting quality assurance targets based on such things as “continuous improvement”) and “creating incentives for gaming” (strategizing to gain advantage in a competitive system) (Power, *Risk Management*, 26).

5.2 The micro context of FNEEQ “Action Plan” concerns

As for the micro context, it refers to the level of everyday experience in colleges, academic departments and classrooms. It is in these spaces and settings that the quality assurance managerial project in higher education is made tangibly manifest and in which it has everyday effects. It is not the purview of this paper to offer a full account of the effects of quality assurance at this micro level of the education system. Rather, some observations will be made in respect of how the extension and deepening of quality assurance management in Québec colleges has been manifest in workplace conditions and in intra-institutional relations and power dynamics.

One informative place to start this discussion is with the “quality assurance process”—that is, the audit of quality systems and mechanisms being carried out by the CEEC. The “process” affects conditions and internal relations between key constituent actors in a number of respects:

- (a) it compels college administrations to change managerial practice and design in order to become more “QA compliant”;
- (b) in orienting administrative and managerial conduct in accordance with external audit priorities and criteria, changes are made to the everyday of departmental operations, classroom practice and course and curriculum delivery;
- (c) the state body responsible for overseeing and evaluating quality-based management in colleges, descends into the micro setting through the gathering of information from academic programs and departments and from teachers and, over the period of the audit visit, being physically present in the institution to carry out its examination;
- (d) the “process” engenders tensions between teachers over the desirability of the quality assurance management model and over compliance with the demands of the audit process—tensions that may take form in ways that are not easily resolvable through collective means of debate.

As of the start of the 2018-19 academic year, the CEEC has carried out some sixty audit visits in Québec colleges (CEEC, “Planification”). There are approximately thirty visits remaining, including the visit to Vanier College. Drawing on reports and documented actions in some audited colleges, it is possible to have a preliminary portrait of the effects of the process on everyday workplace conditions and on relations between teachers and administrations. For instance, it is notable that at some of the colleges where audits were carried out at the beginning of the process (e.g. Collège Shawinigan, Cégep Marie-Victorin, Collège Lionel-Groux), teachers mobilized in opposition to the CEEC’s aims and objectives. Among other things, opposition at these institutions took the form of the defeat of motions at Academic Councils for the adoption of the Colleges’ self-evaluations (the step that precedes the audit visit). In one case, in 2014, grounds for the rejection of a motion to adopt the institution’s self-evaluation included the view that quality assurance management was a means by which the increased commercialization of education would be brought about. Additionally, it was argued that to accept the self-evaluation within the framework of a CEEC audit would amount to giving legitimacy to the control and evaluation powers of an external body, with respect to the College—a body that is not representative of personnel at the College.

In addition to the votes of rejection of the quality-assessment self-evaluations at Academic Councils taken at colleges subject to CEEC audits, many college unions have, since about 2013, adopted General Assembly resolutions affirming that teachers should dissociate from or not cooperate with either the audit process or the introduction and operationalization of quality assurance mechanisms more

generally. These resolutions express positions critical both of the macro-level deployment and effects of quality assurance mechanisms and systems and of the various measures and policies incorporated into the routine, micro-level operations of the institution. Among the points made in such resolutions are that quality assurance processes affect professional and departmental autonomy negatively, they converge with a vision of increased competition within and marketization of the education sector and express a corporatist managerial outlook on the organizational purpose and interest. They also note and challenge an assumption built into the quality assurance model, namely that quality in education can and must be assured by experts and non-teaching personnel external to academic departments (e.g. personnel involved in the analysis and collection of data on course outcomes and the like) but also to the institution (e.g. CEEC auditors). In contrast, teachers have argued that while there are benefits to the collaborative building of knowledge on teaching and pedagogy among institutional constituents, they (teachers) are, and have always been, the first and primary persons in the educational project to be concerned with circumstances and occurrences that may be subject to a quality judgement. For teachers, “quality”, among other descriptors of attainment to which they attend, applies, necessarily to their teaching and to the learning that occurs in classrooms and through course delivery. It also applies to what education contributes and may contribute, in the present and the future, to the lives of students and, more broadly, to social conditions. Further, in teachers’ reflections, quality judgements extend to the work conditions in the places where they engage in the craft and art of teaching and educating. The point, here, is that teachers’ core, perennial and enduring concern with the delivery of content to the highest standard and with students’ acquisition of knowledge and ability to meaningfully assess knowledge is a concern with quality. However, quality is one among many concerns that guide teachers in the carrying out of their craft and profession. Additionally, inasmuch as it is a concern, it is understood in terms other than the quantified representation of a measure of attainment.¹⁹

Finally, it is important to note that the Vanier experience attests to the potential, if not the likelihood, of the QA managerial model penetrating deeply into key loci of educational work – to departments, programs, classrooms and courses – and to encompass a wide scope of the institution’s academic operations. Indeed, the Program Management Policy is a mechanism that would make all facets of the institution’s core purposes (teaching, learning, skill development, knowledge acquisition) subject to the logic of quality assurance management. Yet, in the process, those core purposes and the manner of

¹⁹ For a similar appraisal of the “quality” mantra in the quality assurance managerial approach, see the findings of a study by Anderson (2006, 166-68) on attitudes towards quality assurance management in higher education among some academics in Australian universities.

their pursuit will be redefined and changed. In making quality assurance a kind of managerial panacea, purposes like the exploration, surveying, questioning, imparting and building of bodies of knowledge are shifted, distorted or re-routed in favour of concerns of risk mitigation, client satisfaction and standardization. Consequently, contrary to quality management theory, the key actors in educational organizations (e.g. teachers, professionals, support staff, administrators) do not necessarily unite around a common vision of organizational practice and objectives, namely the pursuit of “continuous improvement” (Anderson, 2006). Nor do they necessarily come to create and embrace a shared “organizational culture” geared to “continuous improvement”.²⁰ To be sure, in educational institutions, “improvement” has been an enduring pursuit and aim among academics, albeit defined in terms other than those of quality management. Thus, unity of purpose and vision, willing participation and cultivation of a shared set of values and modes of interaction that are edifying professionally, are seen to emerge in places and circumstances that do not entail, above all, a continuous and ubiquitous evaluation in the form of a calibration of results with the wants and demands of “clients”. Rather, unity of purpose, to the extent that it is achievable, is seen as being sustained in a climate of respect (for oneself and for others), in fair working conditions and in opportunities for meaningful exchange among those most deeply invested in the organization and its purpose.

6. Conclusion

The integration of quality assurance managerial practices and methods into higher education has occurred on a worldwide scale. It has been achieved in varying degrees and ways in different places. Variations correlate with things like the purview of the state in the education sector, the ability of post-secondary institutions to attract international enrollments, the existence of designated QA oversight bodies within given jurisdictions (national, sub-national) and the presence and strength of teacher unions. Whatever the local specificities may be, a common development over the past twenty years or so, has been that post-secondary institutions, across western states, have opted for, accepted or reconciled themselves to the view that managing educational organizations is optimally achieved through the design, process and practice demands of the quality assurance managerial model. In a way, it may be said that on a veritably worldwide scale, there is now a common method and approach to the management and operation of higher education institutions. This is a remarkable occurrence. It is a

²⁰ See, for instance, Canard (2009, 207) on the change in organizational culture (*changement culturel*) that must occur when quality management methods and systems are introduced into an organization formerly managed according to traditional methods.

circumstance not unlike what one analyst has noted in respect of “risk management”, namely that concerns with risks in organizations, and measures to deal with them, have, since the mid-1990s, come to pervade enterprise management (Power, *Risk Management*, 2004; Power, *Uncertainty*, 2010). This, to the point where almost everything is seen to be a risk or a potential risk in need of management according to a risk calculus (Power, *Risk Management*). In fact, this same analyst has noted that ‘risk’ and ‘quality’ increasingly overlap as categories for dealing with uncertainty in organizations (Power, *Uncertainty*, 52). In the face of the pervasiveness of quality assurance management techniques in higher education, a number of questions arise: What are the implications and what are the effects? Are work conditions for academics – as teachers and researchers – optimized in accordance with what they consider fundamental to fulfillment, satisfaction and pleasure in professional life? Are the learning experiences of students enhanced? Is the mission of the educational project – understood as a knowledge-focused project for the betterment of selves and societies – advanced or compromised? Such questions are being addressed as academics examine and assess the current reality in education. Further, over the coming years, critical examination will continue to be carried out on the “quality turn” in higher education management. While general assessments may be made, it is also the case that an understanding of the new managerial orthodoxy in higher education must take account of developments and experiences in specific and local contexts.

In Québec, the QA managerial project at the college level is seemingly well entrenched. It has an institutionalized presence, in the form of the CEEC as an official, oversight body, and its influence has extended into the everyday of college life through the gradual re-orientation of managerial practice in line with CEEC recommendations. Two developments in the recent history of this project in Québec are particularly noteworthy: the shift, since about 2007-08, in the CEEC’s self-definition to that of a quality assurance agency; the launching of the “quality assurance process” in 2013. These were important moments in the move to make quality assurance a managerial orthodoxy in colleges.²¹ In fact, in 2013, at the launch of the “quality assurance process”, the CEEC stated that in adopting an approach to evaluation focused on the effectiveness of individual colleges’ quality assurance systems, it would lead

²¹ It is the case that in the 2017 Ministerial Report on the *Réseau collégial*, it is proposed that the CEEC’s functions be incorporated into a new body called the *Conseil des Collèges du Québec*. While this proposed change to the education sector may entail the dissolution of the CEEC, it does not, on the face of it, entail a retreat from the move to make QA management a standard, universal practice in Québec colleges (Aubé et al., “Réseau”, 23).

colleges to “...depend on a quality-focused institutional culture necessarily embedded in the continuous management of quality” (author’s translation) (CEEC, “*Systèmes*”, 11).²²

The advent of this QA move has, needless to say, been met with differing responses. College administrations, whether reluctantly or with a measure of scepticism or with enthusiasm, have sought to invest the QA managerial approach into institutional structures, processes and everyday practices. This has been done in various ways including through the adoption of mechanisms and instruments that are specific in scope (e.g. regulations on course and program evaluation) or that are general or institution-wide in purview and application (e.g. strategic plans, program management and evaluation policies) and through the revision of organizational design (e.g. the introduction of “systems” units especially for information gathering, production and diffusion).

Meanwhile, teachers and teacher unions continue to resist and critique the expansion of the model into institutional management. Among other things, teachers have been alert to the ways in which quality assurance management may possibly conflict with the terms of the Collective Agreement. Thus, responses to the further integration of QA mechanisms into academic sector management have sought to preserve and defend working condition gains that have been acquired over the years through collective bargaining (e.g. the autonomy of departments). Beyond this, teachers seek and want working conditions consistent with what maintains and maximizes relations of respect and dignity among all those sharing in the knowledge undertaking that is at the heart of education. For many, it is seen as perilous to such relations to run institutions according to objectives and priorities calibrated to things like quantitative indicators of “quality” or that aim at “improvement” for its own sake and put the control and mitigation of risk at the forefront of the institutional interest. For many teachers the real risk lies in the possibility that a resort to a “quality assurance” blueprint for organizing and managing education, with its attendant processes of continuous evaluation, scoring and ranking, will compromise trust, autonomy and dignity in the everyday of teaching and, therefore, diminish the qualitative good of the learning experience for students.

²² The original text reads: *Pour les collèges, cette approche d'évaluation les amène à s'appuyer sur une culture institutionnelle de la qualité qui s'inscrit nécessairement dans un mode de gestion continue de la qualité.*

Acknowledgements

This paper was prepared as part of the work of the VCTA's *Education and Society Committee*, formed, in 2014, following the issuance of the FNEEQ "Action Plan" on countering the quality assurance process. It has benefitted greatly from the helpful comments and suggestions of a number of Vanier colleagues: Hodé Erdogan, Sophie Jacmin, Estelle Lamothe and Jacques Mainville (current and former members of the VCTA's *Education and Society Committee*), Stephanie Belmer (former member of the *PMP Working Group*), and the members of the 2018-19 VCTA Executive (Sheila Das, Eric Durling, Estelle Lamothe, Jacques Mainville).

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