Quality Assurance in Literacy and Essential Skills:
Possible Approaches
This project was funded by the Government of Canada’s Adult Learning, Literacy and Essential Skills Program.
Contents

Introduction ........................................................................................................................................ 1
What is quality assurance? .................................................................................................................... 2
Why have quality assurance mechanisms in education and training? .................................................. 3
What does quality assurance in education and training look like? ...................................................... 4
Models of quality assurance .................................................................................................................. 5
Quality assurance and its relationship to accreditation ....................................................................... 9
Quality assurance systems in adult basic education .......................................................................... 9
Some quality assurance approaches in basic skills systems ................................................................ 10
Quality Assurance and its relationship to instructor qualifications .................................................... 11
Quality assurance in the Canadian context ......................................................................................... 12
Is there a need for a Canadian quality assurance mechanism for literacy and essential skills in Canada? ......................................................................................................................... 13
Questions Moving Forward .................................................................................................................. 15
Introduction

Accountability, quality and program improvement in adult education and training has received growing attention in recent years as both governments and non-governmental organizations struggle to respond to heightened public scrutiny regarding program outcomes and returns on investment. This has been characterized by the development of national qualification frameworks, program standards, program accreditation, continuous improvement/moderation processes and performance management criteria. While quality assurance systems have been applied across higher education and vocational training for decades across Europe and Commonwealth countries, quality assurance approaches are now being featured more significantly in adult basic education policy and programming agendas. Furthermore, quality assurance approaches are increasingly seen as indispensable parts of explaining and legitimizing literacy and language learning by providing the public, industry, labour unions and learners with an understanding of the skills, knowledge and dispositions they likely will obtain and what may result from the training - such as employment, occupational progression, or the ability to pursue further training.

Yet, the emergence of quality as a key global policy issue in workforce and workplace learning has also led to the development of a ‘quality industry’ comprised of government agencies or external accreditations bodies that too often create additional administrative loads on those responsible for the actual delivery of training. While such trends may be disconcerting to literacy and essential skills programs and practitioners, it is no longer sufficient to simply state that literacy and essential skills learning, programs or courses have an impact; that program improvement occurs organically and that all programs are equal in adapting to the new realities of the modern workplace, technology, and labour markets. Canada’s literacy and essential skills community is not immune from the drive to accountability and outcomes. Additionally, if the desire to strengthen the bonds between industry and essential skills programs is to be brought to fruition, then some form of validation or accreditation is required to inform employers that consistent standards are in place.

Given these policy directions, the sustainability of literacy and essential skills programming may well be dependent on whether the LES community involved in workforce and workplace learning can mobilize itself to determine a quality assurance process. Lessons from other jurisdictions tell us that there is a choice. As a community we can mobilize around a more emergent quality assurance approach that focuses on program improvement and the value that participants gain from their training, the utility of what they learn and the contribution of these to positive longer term outcomes such as employment, occupational progression and social and economic contribution to society.

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the ‘how and why’ of various quality assurance approaches, their dimensions, strengths and weaknesses, and a synopsis of what is occurring in other jurisdictions. The paper concludes by raising some of the wider QA issues that need to be considered and discussed in the Canadian context.
What is quality assurance?

Quality Assurance (QA) emerged as a business methodology during the 1950’s. It became a process-centered approach to ensure that a company or organization is providing the best possible products or services. It is related to quality control, which focuses on the end result, such as testing a sample of items from a batch after production. Although quality control and quality assurance are sometimes used interchangeably, quality assurance focuses on enhancing and improving the processes that are used to create the end result, rather than focusing on the result itself. Among the parts of the process that are considered in QA are leadership, planning, design, development, production and service.

The process of QA therefore compares the quality of a product or service with a minimum standard set either by the producer or by some professional standards authority in order to guide and improve on these processes. The standard can bare some relationship to a best practice, but this is not always the case. The aim in quality assurance is to ensure that a product or service is fit for the customer.

Total quality management (TQM) is the approach which is most often associated with quality assurance. It refers to systems developed to monitor all of the processes that are part of the an organization’s work. Supporters of total quality management systems believe that their systems are different from earlier ideas of quality control. Instead of only looking at finished products, all the steps of the production process are examined.

In the 1970s, QA methods began appearing in government services across North America, Europe and Asia, particularly in the areas of healthcare, government procurement, education and public housing. There was, however, a different philosophy behind the approach towards QA in industry versus the public service. Within industry, the philosophy over the past 50 years has focused on the training of employees to prevent problems, strengthening organizational systems, and continually improving performance. Within public service areas such as health and education, the emphasis has been primarily focused on compliance; relying on government controls, professional credentials, internal audits, and more recently, external inspections to maintain standards, remove poor performers and solve problems.

One of the great difficulties in discussing QA frameworks related to public service, is to find a shared understanding of what is meant by the term quality, in contrast with the relatively simple task of defining other measures of organizational performance. What is meant by quality? How can it be measured or assured and who needs to agree on the definitions and the measures to be employed? Furthermore, quality means different things to different people depending on their perspective and context.
Why have quality assurance mechanisms in education and training?

The development of QA systems in education and training invariably evolve from the specific circumstances of each jurisdiction. However, the central concept emanates from a desire among stakeholders (government or participants) or institutions and programs themselves to ensure that minimum standards are met and that learners and other stakeholders are appropriately informed. The different rationales that informed quality assurance systems in other jurisdictions normally evolved from particular pressures including historical developments of national occupational standards, specific stakeholder concerns, and the desire of institutions and organizations to be recognized and legitimized. Nonetheless, there are a number of common impetuses that informed most attempts to develop, and institute quality assurance mechanisms in education and training:

**Increasing Pressures to Demonstrate Accountability:** The use of public funds, as well as private contributions and purchases, are being increasingly being scrutinized. Governments have felt an increasing need to demonstrate that program expenditures on education and training are effective in producing the projected results and are also a good use of the resources provided.

**Improved Learning Outcomes:** A fairly new development in QA, is the focus on learning outcomes. This follows from two challenges: first, is a program or institution actually meeting the learning objectives, the acquisition of identified knowledge, and skills or dispositions of participants? Second, does it addresses the need for ‘consumer confidence’ for both participants, and potential participants as a basis for decision-making as to where to put their time, resources, and efforts?

**Better Alignment of Achievement Levels with Occupations:** Often a broad purpose of quality assurance systems is to articulate, as clearly as possible, the skills required for participants to be successful in an occupation or chosen field of employment. Sometimes this takes the form of ‘national standards’ agreed to by employers and unions. Other jurisdictions have taken a more ‘capacity-oriented’ approach. The latter requires institutions to demonstrate that they have the resources, and in some cases the processes necessary to understand current occupational and generic-skill requirements for the occupations they are training for.

**Fostering a Culture of Continuous Program Improvement:** Quality procedures for improvement aim at promoting future performance rather than making judgments on past performance: the focus is not on control (accountability) but on improving program quality. Along with other purposes related to QA, the intent is to ensure that stakeholders (funders, program participants, and industry) that the program or institution is being continuously improved. This normally includes specific provisions for how program data is used for improvement, processes for consultations to ensure up-to-date standards, and raises questions about the organizational capacity for change.

**Increasing Participant Mobility:** Most quality-assurance systems are responsible for providing and supporting two aspects of mobility. First, the needs to provide participants with credentials
that are common and recognized. Second, that graduates or program completers will able to continue their education/training and that the learning previously undertaken is recognized as a part of a larger system of education/training. Many QA systems identify a transfer or harmonization function to ensure that participants have access to subsequent opportunities and that the program in question is not a dead end.

**Enhancing Program Capacity:** Capacity generally means that the QA system and the approach taken to evaluate programs are able to identify the relationship between organizational capacity, the program’s use of resources and the outcomes achieved. Some systems approach their entire processes as that of evaluating organizational capacity rather than outcomes or accountability. However, the evaluation of capacity to deliver quality programming exists in all QA systems, and at least in part, a function of its capacity along several dimensions, including staffing, financial management, curricular and delivery expertise, and learning and information-management resources.

While most QA mechanisms have motivations to address each of the above impetuses, different jurisdictions emphasize different elements. This is often dependent on whether the mechanism is mandated by government - where the focus is normally on summative functions such as compliance and accountability or resides in an autonomous body organized or recognized by the programs/institutions themselves, where the focus is directed more towards formative functions such as evaluation and program improvement.

**What does quality assurance in education and training look like?**

For an adult student or program participant, a quality education or training experience is likely to be one which prepares or contributes to their career, and/or generally supports her or his personal development. For program staff, quality lies in their capacity to effectively generate and transmit new knowledge to participants. For governments, quality normally translates to efficient and effective use of public resources in order to achieve the best outcomes possible. For industry, quality often rests in the skills and competences of graduates/program completers that they employ. These views of quality are not necessarily contradictory, and most quality assurance mechanisms attempt to develop processes to ensure each vision of quality is achieved.

So while the concept of QA in education and training is not a new one, the range of the terminology and methodologies which are used to define, develop and apply it, are relatively recent. Indeed, the different approaches to quality assurance often reflect different conceptions of the primary purposes of education and training itself. However, for the most part, quality assurance in education (public school systems) post-secondary education (including Universities, Colleges and vocational training) and continuing education (literacy and language
training) was initially driven by a desire to achieve of transparency and objectivity. It attempted to:

- ensure the quality of instruction
- relevancy of curriculum
- guide internal processes and structures (such as classroom size)
- validate learning credentials

Furthermore, it was understood that the transparency should be two way, meaning that QA should make institutions and programs transparent, but also that QA in itself should be transparent, allowing the outcomes to be shared to participants.

While there are numerous forms of QA in adult education and training, the term is usually applied in one of two ways, external and internal. Internal refers to an institution’s policies and mechanisms for ensuring that it is fulfilling its own mandate, as well as the standards that apply to education and training in general. External QA refers to the actions of an external body, possibly a QA agency formed in cooperation with a program’s peers or by a government appointed body, which assesses the operation of the institution, to determine whether it is meeting the agreed standards.

**Models of quality assurance**

While there are many different approaches to implementing and determining quality assurance system in education and training – these systems can be roughly categorized into three model types. It should be noted that these models are not exclusive, but often combine different elements and frameworks. In a number of jurisdictions, there are more than one quality assurance mechanisms and processes with each focusing on a different aspect of quality and/or compliance.

**Models that focus on accountability and compliance**

A compliance model largely focuses on institutional inputs including curriculum, learning materials, instructor qualifications, assessment, survey data and other information that is benchmarked against the expected norm. There is also an emphasis on the importance of external ‘audits’ to ensure consistency in the provision of adult education and training. For the most part, compliance models are overseen by government or an arms length body mandated by government for the sole purpose of ensuring quality and accountability. Such models normally feature the following aspects:

- Established standards and criteria for the registration, licensing or accreditation of a program, course or institution
- Mandated instructor and staff qualifications
• Agreed upon processes for ensuring consistency of assessment both within and between providers, assessors and/or courses
• Set processes for a yearly internal evaluation
• A strong emphasis on independent external audit to identify areas of compliance and non-compliance
• Provide transparency by making results public
• Mandatory participation (in order to receive public funding)
• Have clear processes to ensure remediation of non-compliance

The effectiveness of such models is a subject of much debate. Some argue that external government audits have enhanced instruction and learning. There are also suggestions that such processes have empowered both students and potential students by making program reporting public. Those supporting this type of system note that external quality monitoring ensures the integrity of education and training across a system.

Critics of such models contend that while most compliance systems start out with the best of intentions, invariably the approach becomes dominated by compliance and accountability issues and contribute little to the improvement of the learning experience of participants. They suggest that, in most countries, external quality monitoring makes no attempt to encourage quality in learning, but tends to be driven by accountability requirements and standardization processes that limit flexibility. In turn, this leads to programming approaches that are “risk adverse” and systems that discourage innovation. Furthermore, such models are often expensive to manage and require strong centralized systems.

Models that focus on internal evaluation and continuous improvement

The evaluative model used in quality assurance in education and training focuses on internal provider capacity and mechanics for continuous program improvement. This normally includes specific provisions for how program data is used for improvement processes for consultations with all stakeholders (participants or students in particular), procedures for ensuring up-to-date standards, and questions about the organizational capacity for change. Taken together with other purposes related to quality assurance, the intent is to ensure that a wide range of stakeholders - including funders, program participants, industry, etc. - are confident that the outcomes and graduates of the program are appropriate.

While still including accreditation, standards and criteria, these models focus on a self review against a set of evaluative criteria and taking the necessary steps to improve areas of weakness. While such models also have a cyclical external evaluation, it is normally conducted by peers and is a systematic process of enquiry, designed to provide independent advice about program improvement. Often, such models are overseen by ‘peer’ associations formed by providers, however there are a number of government run mechanisms that incorporate strong program improvement dimensions. These models normally include:
• A focus on an institutions core values and mission with evaluation processes attached visibly to these

• Ongoing exploration about the value that learners gain from their education, the utility of their learning and longer term outcomes such as employment and social interaction

• A process for exploring qualitative and quantitative evidence of learning outcomes (as opposed to inputs) and the key processes which contribute to them

• Voluntary participation of providers (although not always)

While there is some evidence to suggest that QA systems that emphasize accountability and external audits tend to produce bureaucratic compliance and cynicism, studies suggest that it is not necessarily clear that systems that focus on evaluation and internal review always achieve better learning and learning environments. There is some evidence that using internal evaluation as the primary focus of quality assurance carries some element of the risk. Providers sometimes use internal evaluation to promote their reputation and image as providers of quality training. Consciously or unconsciously, management is tempted to use the review process to influence an external judgment rather than to inform program improvement. Instead of addressing the issue quality, the process becomes a business case for additional funding and/or promoting reputation. Finally, some critics argue that too often self evaluation reports routinely tend to overvalue organizational performance.

**Models that focus on incentives**

In the pursuit of quality, in both the business and the non-profit sector, governments and foundations began turning to quality award programs as a way to encourage and recognize quality management processes, benchmarking best practices, performing self assessments and achieving improvements. These are used not only as criteria for organizations applying for the award, but also as a guide for those interested in implementing proven performance excellence initiatives.

The most well-known of these awards is the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Awards. The purpose of this competitive award program is to improve quality and productivity in the USA by establishing guidelines and criteria that can be used by organizations to evaluate their own quality improvement efforts. Organizations that apply are judged on leadership, strategic planning, customer and market focus, measurement, analysis, human resources, process management and results. At its core, the Baldrige Award is essentially a national educational program that encourages quality through voluntary frameworks, exemplars, and awards.

There are over 50 similar awards systems across the United States, Europe and Asia closely modeled on the Baldrige system. Imagine Canada has set up a National Standards Program for charities and non-profits that contains a number of criteria similar to Baldrige. Organizations can become accredited if they complete a participation agreement and pay the appropriate application fees. Accreditation is based on a voluntary peer-review-based accreditation process.
It is difficult to measure quality assurance systems that are primarily based on awards, although independent evaluations of the Baldrige Awards indicate that the framework does have significant impact in terms of quality for those who participate. Furthermore, its voluntary aspect has some appeal to the non-profit sector. The scope and impact of awards systems (because of their very nature) however are limited when it comes to system impact.

**Hybrid models**

Hybrid Quality Assurance Model

In some jurisdictions, quality assurance systems in adult education and training use hybrid models combining many aspects of internal and external quality assurance. Hybrid models that combine both external and internal quality assurance mechanisms attempt to inculcate “quality practices” into regular organizational activities. Internal mechanisms often closely related to common total quality management (TQM) frameworks and practices that allow organizations to conduct regular self assessments. These self assessments include institutional strategies, governance, leadership, business development, and continuous improvement (improvement of service delivery and organizational capacity). Hybrid quality assurance mechanisms are most
commonly designed and monitored by third party agencies and normally include standards related to qualification frameworks, assessments, program development, organizational capacity (instructor qualifications), data collection processes, administration requirements and performance evaluations.

In these systems quality assurance processes mechanisms are highly transparent so the standards and processes that are deployed are objective, fair and open. This level of transparency allows for government agencies or third parties bodies to conduct audits and/or moderation processes. Increasingly, many of these hybrid quality assurance systems are including rewards and incentives based on performance evaluations and targets. There is some evidence that these systems may be the most effective in providing quality learning environments.

**Quality assurance and its relationship to accreditation**

Globally, QA has now become the prerequisite for the accreditation of most programs. Since education and training institutions are constantly evolving and changing, accreditation is based on an evaluation done at a specific point in time, normally with reference to a specific programming area (course or program). This normally leads to the awarding of a certificate or recognition that the institution or program meets certain standards. When accrediting; quality assurance usually attempts to guarantee that the standard measured in the accreditation process can be upheld in the long term. More generally speaking, accreditation is an evaluation of whether an institution or program meets a threshold standard and qualifies for a certain status. Obtaining accreditation may have implications for the institution or program itself such as permission to operate or for its participants (eligibility for grants).

In most countries, the function of educational accreditation for higher education and vocational training is conducted by a government organization or an arms length body appointed by government. In other countries, such as the United States, the QA process is independent of government and performed by private membership associations.

**Quality assurance systems in adult basic education**

There is almost universal acceptance on the importance of adult literacy and numeracy skills and their positive association with wages, participation in the labor market likelihood of employment, and participation in further education or training activities (OECD 2013). Yet despite its importance, along the adult education and training continuum, adult literacy is the least likely to have quality assurance frameworks. Much of some of this can be attributed to weak funding systems, diversity of provision, and literacy’s historic roots in volunteerism. Nonetheless, as UNESCO recently noted,
“There are specific reasons to address the issue of quality assurance in adult literacy learning. In most countries adult literacy is not a well-defined sector with an explicit strategy and it appears as the weakest link in most national lifelong-learning systems. The lack of standards or quality assurance mechanics has let to the patchy nature of adult learning professionals’ initial and continuing professional development and their poor occupational status and career opportunities.”

There are, however, a number of approaches that have taken root primarily across Commonwealth and European countries. These systems have taken on various formats and iterations – from government run systems that are highly prescriptive (United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Singapore) and primarily focused on issues of standards and accountability while other systems take a “lighter touch” approach (European EVQA, and some U.S. States), with the focus on internal monitoring and support aimed towards continuous improvement and the raising of program capacity to meet participant needs. For the most part, countries with a strong focus on linking adult literacy and numeracy to vocational education, workforce skills and workplace education use QA as a lever to validate assessment, document attainment levels and to legitimize the training in the eyes of industry and workers. Systems that have focused on softer and less rigorous frameworks, such as EQVAT in Europe are using QA frameworks to encourage agencies to examine their strategies, standards, and curriculum for adults seeking to improve their literacy skills as part of life-long learning approaches.

Some quality assurance approaches in basic skills systems

Singapore:
The Singapore Workforce Development Authority (WDA) has developed a national credentialing system called Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) which includes both literacy and language programming. It is designed to train, develop, assess and recognize individuals for the key competencies that industry values. WSQ caters to adult workers with widely diverse training needs and offers a range of certifications and qualifications ranging from Basic Skills Certificates to Industry Diplomas. WDA has developed a quality assurance framework as a mechanism that is designed to uphold the quality of WSQ including agencies that deliver workforce and workplace basic skills.

WDA quality assurance framework is made up of two processes the Pre-Delivery Approval and Continuous Improvement Review (CIR). Pre-delivery approval includes both organizational approval accreditation and course accreditation. It is designed to ensure that organizations have the capacity to deliver courses that satisfy the competency requirements of the WSQ. The second process of the QA is CIR which ensures that every approved training organization (ATO) maintains the standard of delivery in training and assessment. Every ATO is required to pursue continuous improvement to raise the quality of design and delivery of their services.

Austria:
The Austrian Adult Education is a complex system characterized by large number of diverse providers which had used different systems including quality management systems and quality assurance procedures for the past twenty years. In 2011, the Austrian Federal Ministry for Education, Arts and Culture in cooperation with representatives from Austrian provinces and providers of adult education, came together to develop, promote, and agree on an overall framework of a quality assurance system for adult education in Austria. Now called “Ö-Cert”, the system is in early stages and is focused on increasing transparency for customers (learners and for public authorities), simplify administration and improve the quality of adult education.

Ö-Cert registers providers as part of the quality assurance system. Providers have to fulfill basic requirements, conduct a yearly internal evaluation and must submit the evaluation to an external auditor.

**Australia:**
The Australian Quality Framework (AQTF) is the national set of standards which assures nationally consistent, high-quality training and assessment services for the clients of Australian vocational training (VET) systems. Literacy and language programs comprise an important part of the AQTF and delivery agents range from community colleges to small community led programs.

Currently the system is undergoing major reforms with a number of priorities at the forefront. First, they want to address “employer concerns to government about some elements of the system, particularly the quality and consistency of assessment and student learning outcomes.” Secondly, the new framework encourages providers and industry to focus on students and workers from low socioeconomic and disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, in order to better link employers and workers with appropriate training provision (and to facilitate transparency for the public), the Australian government has created an interactive directory of accredited providers (including literacy and language programs) which publicizes measures of training provider quality and performance.

**Quality Assurance and its relationship to instructor qualifications**

At the core of the discussion about the relationship between QA and instructor qualifications is the question of what characteristics or qualities does an instructor need to posses? Given the diversity and complexity of different system and programs aims, functions, contexts, roles and practices within in the adult educational and training field, reaching a common consensus of what constitutes as “qualified” is challenging at best. Furthermore, as standards, programs and aims continue to change, the process of updating ‘professional’ standards becomes more difficult. Standard qualifications also bring into question of who is responsible for setting the occupational standards.
Across jurisdictions there is a strong divide regarding the extent to which quality assurance and instructor qualifications intersect within adult education and training. Some systems have strong prescriptions and regulations related to the required credentials or educational attainment for staff (instructors, assessors and administrators) as part of a QA framework, while other systems focus on the process of determining what attributes and skills a quality instructor or staff person should have and, in turn, place an emphasis on developing protocols for finding appropriate individuals when hiring. Finally, more robust quality assurance frameworks provide an important mechanism for improving the effectiveness of professional development, including: informing the means for improving career path opportunities; providing incentives for continuous professional learning; and building capacity for leadership.

**Quality assurance in the Canadian context**

In Canada, since postsecondary education and training is the responsibility of provincial and territorial governments - each has its own QA mechanisms. This encompasses all types of formal instructional programs beyond secondary school, including academic, vocational, technical, and continuing professional education, whether offered by universities, community colleges, private career colleges or institutes. Indeed, there are over 75 bodies (either government mandated or professional organizations) directly involved in setting standards, validating credentials, monitoring and accrediting providers of training and post-secondary education. Depending on the province or territory, there are a variety of processes for program approval and participation in quality assurance frameworks may either be mandatory or voluntary.

The issue of QA across adult education and training is becoming increasingly important to governments across Canada (both Federal and Provincial) as pressures around transparency and accountability remain in the public eye. Furthermore, the Council of Ministers of Education Canada noted that “the lack of national or common standards in post secondary education presents a challenge for student mobility and transferability within Canada”.

Unlike our Commonwealth and European counterparts, the issue of QA as it relates to the delivery of basic skills in Canada has remained a largely unexplored area. Two provincial initiatives may be of interest, both of which touch upon aspects of QA. The Quality Initiative, Community Adult Learning Services, Province of New Brunswick launched this initiative in December 2009 to explore and define what constitutes quality as this relates to the province’s adult literacy and essential-skills programs. While the initiative is not a quality-assurance process, it is a process designed to begin developing and implementing a quality-assurance model that will lead to continuous improvement in service delivery. It is comprised of an annual internal assessment and an external evaluation every five years to evaluate performance. To date, while elements of the Quality Initiative have been launched, the adoption of the standards remains limited.

In Ontario, the Literacy and Basic Skills (LBS) Performance Management System (PMS) includes three inter-related components: the LBS Performance Management Framework,
Continuous Improvement, and Business Intelligence. The LBS Performance Management Framework (PMF) includes dimensions of service delivery and core measures to assess service provider performance and overall performance of the LBS program. The system is primarily designed to provide the government ‘as funder’ with information that it thinks is important. While it does ask programs to conduct ‘customer satisfaction’ survey to learners – it does not engage a broader group of stakeholders, specify instructor qualifications and skills, accredit agencies or award certificates to participants who reach a defined standard of achievement – all of which are normal functions of a quality assurance mechanism.

Is there a need for a Canadian quality assurance mechanism for literacy and essential skills in Canada?

Most conversations in Canada about “accreditation” in literacy and essential skills have primarily focused on the certification or professionalization of literacy practitioners. Indeed, the push towards professionalization throughout the field of adult and training has been a longstanding source of debate. In Ontario, the LBS community has discussed on numerous occasions about the need to articulate the skills and knowledge required to be a literacy practitioner and the kind of framework that could capture practitioner recognition. While these efforts expressed the need for more consistent standards for professionalism and quality instruction, the field could not come to a consensus on a model. Invariably, the momentum for implementing practitioner certification did not prove viable given the institutional diversity of service providers and the lack of agreement on what constituted effective adult literacy practice.

None of the conversations around instructor professionalization, however, explicitly approached the issue of accrediting programs (a primary dimension of QA) instead of practitioners. While the issues of QA and instructor professionalization are not necessarily exclusive, it is surprising the issue of quality assurance has remained absent during provincial dialogues. Conversely, at the national level, the call for quality frameworks has arisen on a number of occasions.

In 2006, the Council of Education Ministers of Canada raised a number of questions about the uneven quality of delivery among adult literacy programs and called for a pan-Canadian effort to create a coherent and long-term strategy to strengthen the quality of adult-literacy provision.

In late 2012, the Office of Literacy and Essential Skills (OLES) at Employment and Skills Development Canada (ESDC) conducted a stakeholder consultation, Defining Canada’s Needs for a Nationally Funded Network of Adult Literacy and Essential Skills Organizations. The purpose was to develop a sharper picture of the state of literacy and essential skills (LES) functions, and priority areas of focus that the federal government should be supporting in order to improve programming. The report noted that while there was broad agreement on the need for quality assurance, due to the many definitions on what constitutes success, finding a framework or indications might be a challenge and/or a bridge too far.
Yet the disconnect between LES delivery and the education and training system at large is a significant problem for both current participants in programs and for those would be participants who would profit from a more coherent system. This is particularly true of low-skilled job seekers or workers caught in entry level employment who would benefit from LES delivery that was fully articulated to skills training or occupational progression.

In his recent comprehensive study titled No Shortage of Opportunity - Policy Ideas to Strengthen Canada’s Labour Market in the Coming Decade, Cliff Halliwell from the Institute for Research on Public Policy highlights the weakness of Canada’s “second-chance” system of education and training. He notes that the system is essentially a patchwork of programs and services that are incoherent to participants, government and industry. He calls for a comprehensive “second-chance” system to provide more structured pathways for low-skilled individuals – “one that is comprehensive, as to constitute a comprehensive, coherent, permanent and hence navigable system.”

Given the broad diversity of types of LES providers, methods of assessment and goals of learners – a unified system of quality assurance seems unlikely. But in answer to Halliwell’s challenge, what role can some LES programs play in creating more coherent workforce pathways for lower-skilled individuals? Can LES programs create meaningful avenues for employers to up-skill their workforce? Could a voluntary quality assurance approach that solely focuses on accrediting workforce and workplace LES provision help create the foundation for a more coherent system? An argument can be made that assurances for quality, transparency, and meaningful qualifications frameworks should be just as strong for LES as is it for higher education.

To make this happen, broad cooperation is needed at several levels in order to implement a quality assurance framework that provides clarity to job-seekers, workers and employers. It would require:

- Agreement on the right content, correct standards, and levels of knowledge and performance,
- Outcomes which can document the overall success of the LES program, as well as provide for participants’ who are “certified” or “assessed” related to learning and employment outcomes,
- Appropriate organizational processes for continuous improvement,
- Processes for accrediting “quality” programs and corrective evaluation processes for programs under review.
Questions Moving Forward

Views about quality assurance system are too often formulated by policy makers and implemented using a top-down approach. Lessons from elsewhere tell us that successful quality assurance frameworks evolve from collaborative ground level efforts and that acknowledge the need for both standards and flexibility. With this in mind, a number of critical questions need to be posed in terms of whether such collaboration is feasible and what form it might take:

- Where would a quality assurance system for literacy and essential skills reside (who would administer it) and what would its role be? How viable and valuable would a quality assurance system shared by Canada’s 13 provincial and territorial jurisdictions be?
- Would the system be voluntary or mandatory? What would the relationship between the accrediting body and its members look like?
- Would quality assurance apply to an institution or to a specific essential skill program within an institution? Many institutions offering literacy and essential skills are already part of one (or more) quality mechanisms.
- Should the focus be on program internal capacity or external outcomes or both?
- What does the role of student certification related to literacy and essential skills play?
- What does the role of instructor certification related to literacy and essential skills play?
- Would the emphasis be on compliance, performance or program improvement?