

## EVALUATING THE ONTARIO ACADEMIC COURSE TEACHER IN-SERVICE PROGRAM

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**Abstract:** The general purpose of this program evaluation was to provide formative information to the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (and through the office to the Ministry of Education and Training) for improving the Ontario Academic Course Teacher In-Service Program (OAC-TIP). The evaluation was designed and conducted in collaboration with EQAO's Assessment Advisory Committee, representing the key partner organizations, and a steering committee of individuals experienced with the program. Data for the study were collected by means of questionnaires, focus-group consultations, and a review of Ministry of Education and Training documents and records. The study generated 25 recommendations for consideration in the development/redesign of an OAC-TIP-like program.

**Résumé:** Le but général de ce projet d'évaluation est de fournir au bureau de la qualité et de la responsabilité en éducation (EQAO) et au Ministère de l'Éducation et de la Formation des renseignements visant l'amélioration du programme de perfectionnement en cours d'emploi des enseignantes et des enseignants des cours préuniversitaires de l'Ontario (OAC-TIP). Cette évaluation a été conçue et dirigée en collaboration avec le comité consultatif en évaluation de l'EQAO, qui représente divers partenaires en éducation, et d'un comité de gestion composé d'individus ayant déjà oeuvré dans ce programme. Les données de cette étude ont été recueillies à partir de questionnaires, de consultations auprès de groupes cibles et d'une revue de la documentation et de dossiers provenant du Ministère de l'Éducation et de la Formation. Suite à cette étude, vingt-cinq recommandations ont été formulées et seront considérées lors de la restructuration ou du développement d'un programme semblable au OAC-TIP.

█ In the mid-1980s, the Ontario Ministry of Education implemented the Ontario Academic Course Teacher In-service Program (OAC-TIP), at least in part because of the perception that there was

considerable variability in how student marks were awarded province-wide at the OAC level. The resulting series of French- and English-language examination reviews at the OAC level (the final year of secondary education) focused on the adequacy of teacher-made examinations and how they were marked. It provided a way of monitoring examinations using a process that at the time was considered to be of greater educational benefit than a return to a system of provincial secondary school exit examinations. Thus, the program was implemented as a quality-control or moderating device to ensure greater consistency in how student marks in OAC courses were derived and awarded across the province, and to provide teachers with professional development opportunities in order to improve classroom assessment practices.

## PURPOSES OF OAC-TIP

The specific purposes of OAC-TIP were to:

- ensure the implementation of Ministry criteria for assessing student achievement at the OAC level,
- increase consistency in designing and marking OAC examinations,
- refine final marks policy, and
- provide professional development for teachers.

All publicly funded and inspected private secondary schools offering OAC courses were expected to participate in OAC-TIP. The review process, which took place over a four- to five-year period, had five stages: research, development, implementation, review, and maintenance/follow-up.

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

In the research stage, a study of OAC assessment practices, in a selected subject, was conducted in a representative sample of the province's secondary schools. This process included compiling data from teacher questionnaires, collecting and analyzing OAC examinations, and conducting on-site interviews with teachers.

In the development stage, a draft teacher handbook was developed based on best practices, as identified through the findings of the

research study. This handbook reflected provincial expectations as expressed in the curriculum guideline and, therefore, was tailored to suit the specific OAC subject under review.

In the implementation stage, one-day workshops to implement the handbook specifications were provided over a one-year period in various locations throughout the province to all teachers involved in the OAC subject.

In the review stage, each school offering the OAC subject was required to submit one set of assessment materials including: examinations with detailed marking schemes; three marked student responses representing high, medium, and low achievement; and a teacher questionnaire. A provincial review team analyzed the student assessment materials to determine the extent to which they were consistent with provincial expectations as provided in the handbook and the subject guideline. Following the review, school, school board, and provincial reports were written and distributed by the Ministry. Schools not conforming to Ministry guidelines were expected to re-submit assessment materials the next time the course was offered.

In the maintenance/follow-up stage, the handbook was further refined and distributed, and schools receiving low conforming results were required to take corrective action such as filing a plan with the Ministry or re-submitting examination materials. Non-participating schools were required to submit examination materials the next time the course was offered.

## PURPOSE OF THE EVALUATION

In the original design of OAC-TIP, no provision was made for ongoing evaluation of the program itself. Although the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAQO) has received strong messages of support for the program from educators, few data were available on the extent to which the program was meeting its objectives. Also, with the Minister of Education and Training's (MET) announcement in 1995 that there would be a new secondary-school program, it became clear that OAC-TIP would have to undergo changes to be consistent with any new directions within Ontario's education system. As a result, there was a strong rationale for conducting an evaluation of OAC-TIP.

The general purpose of this program evaluation was to provide EQAO (and through it, MET) with formative information for OAC-TIP program improvement. Specifically, the study was intended to:

- determine the extent to which the program was meeting its objectives,
- assess the validity of its present objectives,
- determine the usefulness of such a program for other grades/subjects, and
- make recommendations on the design and implementation of a new quality-control program.

The program evaluation was designed around the following issues and research questions:

#### Issue: Program Objectives

##### *Research Questions*

- To what extent have the Ministry's criteria for assessing student achievement at the OAC level been implemented?
- To what extent is there consistency in how OAC examinations are designed and marked?
- To what extent has OAC-TIP contributed to refining final marks policy?
- To what extent does OAC-TIP provide professional development for teachers?
- To what extent do the program's objectives remain valid?
- Are there additional issues or areas of concern the program should address?

#### Issue: Program Design and Implementation

##### *Research Questions*

- Are there ways the program can be improved?
- What recommendations can be made toward the design and implementation of a new quality-control program?

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

A team of two education officers, representing the French and English sections of EQAO's assessment unit, conducted the program

evaluation. EQAO's Assessment Advisory Committee, representing key partner organizations, provided consultation on the project proposal, the study's findings, and draft reports. A steering committee, comprising individuals with a wide range of experience in OAC-TIP processes, advised the team on the design of data-collection instruments and the content and format of reports. The team used questionnaires, focus-group consultations, and Ministry documents and records to collect the required information.

Questionnaires, to be completed by all teachers who had participated in an OAC-TIP review, were distributed to a stratified, random sample of 100 English-language and 50 French-language, publicly funded and inspected private secondary schools. Principals and vice-principals of the selected schools and school board superintendents, consultants, and coordinators of the boards associated with the selected schools were also asked to complete the questionnaire. Respondents were asked not to identify themselves, thereby ensuring anonymity. In total, 509 English-language and 174 French-language questionnaires were completed and returned. Although the questionnaires were meant to be anonymous, it appeared (from the return addresses that many schools had affixed to the envelopes) that returns came from all regions of the province.

Semi-structured, focus-group consultations were conducted in separate English- and French-language meetings. For each language, three focus group consultations were held with: (1) OAC-level teachers representing a provincial cross-section of 30 English- and 15 French-language school boards/sections; (2) education partner organizations such as the Ontario Teachers' Federation (and affiliates), colleges, universities, parent organizations, and subject associations; and (3) EQAO and MET staff, including regional assessment coordinators, representatives from the curriculum, policy, and secondary school reform units of the Ministry, as well as education officers from the assessment unit of EQAO. Virtually all participants had knowledge of, or had had some direct involvement in, OAC-TIP. A fourth focus-group session was held with staff of EQAO and MET who had been involved in OAC-TIP activities such as distribution and receipt, tracking of materials, data entry, database management, and report production and distribution. Focus group type (1) involved one teacher from each school sampled, totalling 30 OAC-level teachers from English-language programs and 15 teachers from French-language programs; focus group type (2) involved approximately 25 organization representatives; and focus group types (3) and (4) involved a combined total of about 20 staff members.

Ministry records, including OAC-TIP provincial reports and associated databases, were also analyzed for information relevant to the program evaluation.

The evaluation of OAC-TIP, from the initial design phase to reporting, took place between February and November 1996.

### Effectiveness of the Methodology

In view of the general purpose of this program evaluation, which was to provide formative information for program improvement, the evaluation methodology was reasonably effective, given the budgetary constraints. The questionnaire response rate was better than expected, and the questionnaires, focus groups, and records provided sufficient data and information to address the study's issues and research questions. Had greater resources been available, it may have been useful to gather and review specific student evaluation materials from a random sample of OAC teachers, and/or to conduct school site visits to determine the extent to which the Ministry's criteria for assessing student achievement had been implemented as intended. In addition, it would have been interesting to examine data on student mark distributions among Ontario high schools and over time.

### CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions, based on the data from the questionnaires, focus-group consultations, and Ministry records, are organized according to the program evaluation's issues and research questions. As the first three research questions are interrelated, their conclusions have been combined.

#### Issue: Program Objectives

*Research Questions:* To what extent have the Ministry's criteria for assessing student achievement at the OAC level been implemented? To what extent is there consistency in how OAC examinations are designed and marked? To what extent has OAC-TIP contributed to refining final marks policy?

Because there has never been a second review cycle associated with OAC-TIP, it was not possible to be definitive about the extent to

which many of OAC-TIP's program objectives have been met. (This lack of follow-up is reflected in the study's recommendations.) However, the overall results of the various subject reviews, together with the responses from the questionnaires and focus groups, provide indications that to a significant extent: (1) the Ministry's criteria for assessing student achievement at the OAC level have been implemented; (2) there is consistency in how OAC examinations are designed and marked; and (3) OAC-TIP has contributed to refining final marks policy.

*Research Question:* To what extent does OAC-TIP provide professional development for teachers?

In general, for those educators who have been exposed to OAC-TIP, including its workshops and documents, the program appears to provide excellent opportunities for professional development. However, the findings suggest that areas for program improvement might focus on finding strategies for providing ongoing workshops/professional support for educators and re-examining the type of information/feedback that is contained in reports, particularly school reports.

*Research Question:* To what extent do the program's objectives remain valid?

Overall, the data and information obtained through the questionnaires and focus-group consultations suggest that OAC-TIP's objectives remain valid and that there is strong support for them. The commonly held suggestions for program change are reflected in the study's recommendations.

*Research Question:* Are there additional issues or areas of concern the program should address?

In general, the responses to the questionnaire and the focus-group discussions indicate there is strong support for the current program objectives; no new, widely supported objectives emerged for OAC-TIP.

#### Issue: Program Design and Implementation

There was a great deal of overlap in the responses to the following two research questions; therefore, the conclusions for these questions have been combined.

*Research Questions:* Are there ways the program can be improved? What recommendations can be made toward the design and implementation of a new quality-control program?

The questionnaires and focus groups provided numerous common suggestions concerning how OAC-TIP could be improved and how an OAC-TIP-like program could be designed and implemented. These findings are reflected in the study's recommendations.<sup>1</sup>

## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Clearly, the program has had its successes. The participants in the consultation process overwhelmingly believed a program like OAC-TIP should continue. In addition to strong educator support for the program, the education community and stakeholder groups support the program's objectives, and it appears that the program has gone a long way toward meeting many of its objectives.

The successes aside, this program evaluation identified several areas where improvements are required. The following 25 recommendations, organized by topic in no particular order, were offered for consideration should a new program like OAC-TIP be designed and implemented.

### Objectives

- Retain the intent of the current OAC-TIP objectives.
- Focus the program on the secondary school exit courses for entry into colleges and universities.
- Revise the objectives' wording to be consistent with the revisions to the secondary school program.
- Emphasize appropriate student assessment in general, while recognizing the importance of bringing consistency to the design and marking of examinations.

### Participation

- Make participation in the program mandatory.
- Establish consequences for non-participation in the program and for not conforming to provincial guidelines.



## Timing

- Complete all unfinished OAC-TIP subject reviews.
- Conduct subject reviews in selected, remaining OAC courses.
- Shorten, where possible, the amount of time required to complete the five stages of the program.
- Establish a schedule of subject reviews and adhere to it.
- Establish a review cycle in which subjects are re-visited every five years or so.

## Administration

- Ensure that there are clear, general and specific policy statements about assessment requirements.
- Review the nature of school submissions.
- Review reporting formats, particularly school reports.

## Follow-up

- Provide feedback to schools and school boards in a timely fashion following subject reviews.
- Establish an effective tracking system to facilitate follow-up with schools not participating or not meeting provincial guidelines.
- Establish mechanisms for ongoing program assessment to judge the effectiveness of the program itself.

## Technology

- Explore ways to use technology to enhance program effectiveness.

## Support

- Explore ways to provide sufficient time, resources, and strategies for ongoing training/professional development in student assessment.
- Find ways to assist schools that are having difficulty meeting provincial guidelines.

### Linkages/Communication

- Create strong links among EQAO, the Ministry, colleges, universities, the College of Teachers, the Ontario Teachers' Federation, and other education stakeholder groups.
- Find ways to promote continuity in assessment practices between secondary school exit courses and courses in earlier years.
- Establish ongoing, effective communication about the program with the field and the public.
- Ensure the program is closely linked to and consistent with developments in secondary school reform.

### Resources

- Implement the program only if sufficient human and financial resources are committed.

### NOTE

- 1 The title of this 1996 EQAO report is *Report of the Program Review: Ontario Academic Course Teacher In-Service Program (OAC-TIP)*, ISBN 0-7778-5879-7. A summary of the report, also dated 1996, is titled *Synopsis of the Report of the Program Review: Ontario Academic Course Teacher In-Service Program (OAC-TIP)*, ISBN 0-7778-5880-0.