

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY

ACADEMIC STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY MATTERS TO SUPPORT
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING

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Approval of Dissertation

The undersigned certify that they have read the dissertation entitled

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STUDENTS IN BLENDED AND ONLINE LEARNING**

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Dedication

For my family, thank you for your love and encouragement throughout this journey.

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Abstract

Over the past decade, international student enrolment in Canadian postsecondary institutions has increased significantly. Academic staff - faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants - play a central role in supporting international students through the design of inclusive and accessible blended and online courses, often without sufficient professional development or institutional support.

This qualitative interpretive case study explored how academic staff at a publicly funded Ontario college, referred to as Blue Jay College, perceived the role of the Quality Matters (QM) framework in supporting international students in blended and online learning environments. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten participants representing faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultant roles and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings indicated that consistency and structure were perceived as important in supporting international student success, that gaps existed between instructional expectations and institutional supports, and that sustaining quality under conditions of workload pressure and precarity was challenging. Analysis indicated that while QM was perceived as a valuable tool to support consistency in course design, its use depended on the level of support available within individual schools and did not reflect a coordinated institutional approach. Participants emphasized the importance of professional development, manageable workloads, and stable working conditions in sustaining inclusive course design practices. As a result, implementation remained inconsistent and largely dependent on individual initiative.

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The findings suggest that without a coordinated institutional approach, course design practices were perceived to vary across Blue Jay College, contributing to inconsistent and potentially inequitable learning experiences for international students across programs and disciplines. Strengthening institutional support for academic staff is therefore essential to support more consistent and inclusive course design practices in blended and online learning environments.

Keywords: Quality Matters (QM), international students, blended and online learning, inclusive course design, instructional quality, Canadian higher education

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Definition of Terms

Academic Staff – Refers to individuals involved in the teaching, design, development, and delivery of postsecondary courses, including faculty members, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. This includes both full-time and part-time personnel.

Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) – A provincial law established in 2005 that establishes and enforces accessibility standards to identify, remove, and prevent barriers for individuals with disabilities.

Blended Learning – A mode of instruction that integrates online digital media with face-to-face classroom methods, offering a mix of synchronous (real-time, including in-person) and asynchronous learning opportunities (Hrastinski, 2019).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy – Refers to intentionally using students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds as resources for learning—creating instructional practices that validate diverse identities and empower learners (Gay, 2000).

Inclusive Course Design – Refers to the intentional development of digital learning environments, materials, and instructional processes that recognize learner diversity, actively involve marginalized perspectives, and aim to improve access and equity for all students. Drawing from the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC), inclusive design operates across three dimensions: (1) recognizing diversity and uniqueness; (2) engaging in inclusive processes and tools; and (3) promoting broader beneficial impact through equitable and flexible learning experiences (IDRC, n.d.).

International Students – Learners who hold a study permit and are enrolled in postsecondary education outside their country of citizenship.

Internationalization – The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education to enhance quality and contribute meaningfully to society (de Wit et al., 2015).

OntarioLearn – A consortium of Ontario’s 24 public colleges that collaboratively offer online courses and shared services. OntarioLearn provides a common platform and has supported the province-wide adoption of the Quality Matters (QM) framework for online and blended course development.

Part-Time Faculty – Instructors employed on a contractual basis rather than as permanent full-time employees. In Ontario colleges, they represent approximately 68% of the teaching workforce (Usher, 2022).

Quality Assurance – Institutional processes and frameworks used to evaluate, maintain, and improve the quality, consistency, and inclusivity of instructional design and course delivery in higher education.

Quality Matters (QM) Framework – A faculty-centred, peer-reviewed quality assurance framework used to evaluate and improve the design of online and blended courses. QM is based on research-supported best practices and includes a rubric structured around eight core design standards (Quality Matters, 2023).

Chapter 1: Introduction

Education is a human right and public good. Education must be continuously provided, innovated, and improved to keep this status in the face of significant global challenges.

— United Nations, 2015

In the context of globalization, higher education institutions are undergoing profound transformations. These shifts are driven by the convergence of cultural, economic, and technological forces, compelling institutions worldwide to redefine their core missions and strategies (Altbach, 2004; Khondker, 2021). Simultaneously, the digital revolution has disrupted traditional educational models, requiring institutions to adapt to new modes of teaching and learning (Kaplan, 2022). One significant outcome of this evolution is the strategic prioritization of internationalization, which continues to reshape educational landscapes globally (Altbach & Knight, 2007; de Wit et al., 2015). Internationalization is defined as the “intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural dimension into the purpose, functions, and delivery of postsecondary education, in order to enhance the quality of education for all students and staff, to make a meaningful contribution to society” (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29).

In Canada, internationalization has become a central institutional strategy, reflected in the rising enrolment of international students, the expansion of global partnerships, and policy initiatives that promote cross-border education (Boal & Stallivieri, 2015; de Wit, 2013). According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE, 2023), international student enrolment increased by 29% during the 2022–2023 academic year alone. While this growth has helped address challenges such as declining domestic enrolment and labour market shortages (Government of Canada, 2022b), it has also revealed gaps in institutional capacity, particularly in the preparedness of academic staff to design and deliver high-quality learning

experiences in blended and online environments. These gaps reflect findings in the literature that point to a lack of training and support for faculty working with international student populations (McGregor et al., 2022; Wysocka & Leja, 2020). Despite heavy investments in recruitment and marketing, many institutions have fallen short in providing training and support for academic staff. This includes faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants responsible for designing high-quality learning experiences for diverse student populations (McGregor et al., 2022). This disconnect can undermine the quality of education that international students receive and adds pressure on academic staff to support increasingly diverse learning needs within institutional contexts where supports for international students may remain uneven (Guo & Guo, 2017; Hunter et al., 2018).

In response to these challenges, this qualitative case study explores how academic staff perceive the Quality Matters (QM) framework as a support for the instructional design and learning experience for international students in blended learning environments at a Canadian college. QM provides a research-informed rubric and peer-review process that guides the design of effective online and hybrid courses, as outlined in its most recent *Seventh Edition Higher Education Rubric* (Quality Matters, 2023). The latest edition incorporates key refinements to reflect the evolving landscape of digital learning, with increased emphasis on accessibility, learner engagement, measurable learning objectives, and instructional alignment. This study examines the experiences and perceptions of faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants at an institution referred to here as Blue Jay College (a pseudonym). It investigates how QM may enhance instructional quality and better support the learning experiences of international students in blended and online learning environments.

Background and Contextualization

Internationalization in Canada has been described as “the first policy priority and the most important agent of change in higher education policy process and practices over the last two decades” (Taskoh, 2020, p. 97). Over the past decade, international student enrolment in Canadian postsecondary institutions has increased significantly, with students from countries such as India, China, and the Philippines comprising the largest cohorts (CBIE, 2023). Their presence contributes meaningfully to campus diversity and institutional revenue, with some colleges reporting that international students account for up to 40% of total tuition income (Statistics Canada, 2023). Despite these benefits, international students often encounter systemic barriers such as cultural exclusion, academic marginalization, and limited access to responsive institutional support services (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019; Tavares, 2021). Many pay substantially higher tuition fees than domestic students (Buckner et al., 2020), yet frequently experience inadequate orientation, academic advising, and instructional approaches that do not fully consider their diverse needs (Ma, 2020; Wilson et al., 2020). These challenges are often exacerbated by institutional priorities that emphasize recruitment and revenue generation over comprehensive student support and integration. This pattern is not unique to Canada. For example, Wysocka and Leja (2018) found that internationalization strategies in European institutions often focus on mobility and market positioning while neglecting the instructional and pedagogical needs of academic staff.

Recent policy developments in Canada have highlighted some of the complex challenges that stem from the rapid growth of international student enrolment, including pressures on housing, healthcare, and other services. Following a 121% increase in study permit applications between 2019 and 2023 (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2026), the Government of Canada

implemented a cap on study permits in January 2024 to limit further growth. Subsequent findings from the Auditor General of Canada (2026) suggest that the resulting decline in study permit approvals was greater than anticipated, contributing to significant challenges across the postsecondary sector.

During the period in which data for this study were collected (August-September 2025), Ontario colleges were experiencing significant financial pressures associated with changing international student enrolment patterns (CTV News, 2025). Although enrolment patterns and institutional conditions may continue to shift in response to policy, economic, and demographic changes, the need for high-quality, accessible, and inclusive learning environments remains. International students continue to represent an important population within Canadian postsecondary education, particularly in Ontario, and require sustained academic and instructional support. Given these considerations, there is a growing need to explore how postsecondary institutions can better support academic staff in designing and delivering high-quality learning experiences that respond to the needs of international students in blended and online environments (see discussion of blended learning in the section “Quality Matters in Blended Learning Environments”).

Statement of the Problem

The rapid growth of international student enrolment in Canadian postsecondary institutions has introduced new pedagogical and institutional challenges, especially in blended and online learning environments. Between 2022 and 2023, Canada experienced a 29% increase in international student enrolment (CBIE, 2023), intensifying the demand for high-quality, inclusive course design. Although colleges have advanced internationalization strategies through recruitment and policy reform (Boal & Stallivieri, 2015; de Wit, 2013), the professional

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development of academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, has not adequately responded to the complexities of teaching international students (McGregor et al., 2022). Moreover, there is a lack of clarity on how existing quality assurance frameworks such as QM can be leveraged as professional development resources to guide inclusive course design in blended learning environments.

Academic staff are often expected to support learners who encounter linguistic, cultural, and technological barriers in blended environments, yet many report limited access to training or guidance for inclusive digital pedagogy (Guo & Guo, 2017; Ma, 2022; Wysocka & Leja, 2020). These issues are compounded in the college sector, where part-time instructors make up nearly 68% of the teaching workforce and are frequently excluded from professional learning opportunities (Singh, 2024; Usher, 2022). The disconnect between institutional goals and faculty preparedness raises concerns about both instructional quality and equity.

The QM framework offers a research-informed rubric and peer-review process to support effective course design in online and blended formats (QM, 2023). While QM is widely recognized as a tool for quality assurance, there is limited research on its potential to support academic staff through structured instructional design resources, notably in relation to international students in Canadian colleges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretive qualitative case study is to explore how academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the QM framework in relation to enhancing instructional quality for international students in blended and online learning environments at a Canadian college. Rather than treating QM solely as a tool for course evaluation, this study explores how it is perceived as a structured, research-informed

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professional development resource that may contribute to more inclusive course design through its clarity, accessibility, and alignment. The study focuses on the perceptions and experiences of academic staff as they navigate course design in these contexts.

Research Questions

Guided by the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed to explore how academic staff experience and interpret the use of the QM framework within blended learning environments. These questions aim to examine both institutional and instructional factors that influence the support of international students through inclusive course design and delivery.

1. How do academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the institutional supports available for designing blended learning experiences for international students?
2. What challenges and barriers do academic staff encounter in designing and delivering blended learning experiences for international students?
3. How do academic staff perceive the role of the Quality Matters (QM) framework in supporting inclusive course design and professional development in blended learning environments?

Academic Staff and Instructional Design

Academic staff play a central role in shaping the learning environments that international students encounter in higher education (Hunter et al., 2018). Through their direct engagement with learners, they are also instrumental in implementing institutional internationalization strategies. Gawronski et al. (2016) highlight the responsibility of institutional leaders to support academic staff through access to frameworks and resources that promote inclusive instructional

practices. However, many institutions fail to provide guidance or training aligned with the demographics of the student body (Gregory et al., 2020). As Zimmerman et al. emphasize, “institutions should focus on quality course design, offer professional development opportunities that meet institutionally adopted standards, and use internal reviews as part of a quality assurance strategy” (2020, p. 159). Driscoll (2023) notes that targeted design support is essential for bridging the gap between instructional intentions and inclusive practice, especially when preparing faculty to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Despite growing awareness, many educators report feeling underprepared to address the linguistic, cultural, and technological challenges of teaching international students in the context of blended and online learning environments (Ma, 2022; McGregor et al., 2022). This lack of preparation undermines instructional quality and weakens the implementation of internationalization goals (Yesufu, 2018). The issue is particularly acute in the college sector, where approximately 68% of faculty are employed on a part-time contract basis (Usher, 2022) and often face limited access to design support or structured instructional resources (Singh, 2024). Even when training is technically available, it is frequently unpaid or scheduled outside of regular teaching hours, which can be challenging for instructors who may juggle multiple jobs across institutions. As Clarke and Kirby (2022) observe, part-time instructors often lack training in both pedagogy and digital tools essential for blended learning. This preparation gap can significantly affect the learning experiences of international students, who benefit from differentiated instructional approaches tailored to their linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Wahed & Zumer, 2015). For example, Baldwin and Ching (2018, 2021) demonstrate that structured tools and checklists can improve alignment, accessibility, and clarity in blended and

online courses, all of which are foundational components of effective learning environments for diverse student populations.

Given these challenges, this study examines how the QM framework may support academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, in enhancing instructional quality for international students in blended and online learning environments at a Canadian college. Blended learning refers to an instructional approach that combines face-to-face methods with online digital components in a purposeful, integrated manner (Graham, 2013). Rather than simply adding technology to traditional instruction, it involves the strategic redesign of course content to leverage the strengths of both physical and virtual environments, aiming to enhance engagement, flexibility, and learning outcomes (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). In this study, blended learning environments are defined as course formats that incorporate both synchronous and asynchronous digital tools (e.g., learning management systems) and in-person interactions to support international student learning.

Blended learning requires intentional design and technological fluency, which can significantly impact the experiences of international students (Baran & Correia, 2014; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Without structured frameworks that emphasize accessibility and clarity, instructors may inadvertently create barriers to learning (Baran, 2018; Elliott et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2020). QM offers a structured, research-informed framework that may support academic staff, including those with limited institutional support, in implementing inclusive, high-quality design practices aligned with internationalization and quality assurance goals (Baran, 2018; de Wit et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2020). Rather than treating QM solely as an evaluative tool, this research explores its potential to guide reflective, inclusive instructional design through structured, research-informed processes (Adair et al., 2018; Shattuck et al., 2019).

To contextualize this potential, the following section examines the origins, structure, and core design principles of the QM framework.

Understanding the Quality Matters Framework

The QM framework is a faculty-centred, peer-reviewed process that certifies the quality of online and blended courses (QM, 2018). Originating in 2003 as a response to the increasing demand for quality assurance in digital education, QM has grown into an international organization adopted by more than 1,300 institutions across 50 countries (Shattuck, 2014). The framework is built around eight core standards (see Appendix A):

1. Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Learning Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability

These standards are supported by detailed rubric and review annotations that emphasize alignment among course components, measurable objectives, and continuous improvement (Legon, 2015). The QM Rubric provides a structured approach to designing inclusive and accessible courses and is particularly relevant for supporting diverse student populations in blended learning environments.

Quality Matters in Blended Learning Environments

Blended learning presents distinct challenges and opportunities for international students. While it offers flexibility and increased access to course content, it also requires intentional and well-structured course design to address potential gaps in student engagement, accessibility, and cultural responsiveness (Baran & Correia, 2014; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). The QM framework supports blended course delivery through research-informed standards that emphasize clearly articulated learning objectives, inclusive assessments, and accessible technologies (Shattuck, 2014; Shattuck et al., 2019). These design principles can be valuable for part-time instructors or those with limited experience teaching international students, who often lack access to consistent pedagogical support (Adair et al., 2018; Baran, 2018). However, implementing QM in blended environments presents a set of challenges. It requires time, training, and institutional commitment, resources that are not always available or equitably distributed across faculty roles (Elliott et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2019). These considerations underscore the importance of understanding how structured design frameworks like QM function within increasingly internationalized, blended learning contexts.

Challenges and Criticisms of QM

While the QM framework has gained significant recognition for its structured approach to course design quality assurance, scholars have raised important concerns about its applicability across diverse educational contexts (Gao & Legon, 2015). These critiques are particularly relevant when considering the framework's application to international student populations in blended learning environments. Baldwin and Ching (2019) note that QM may not address international students' unique challenges in such settings. Woodley et al. (2017) suggest that QM's focus on course design may overlook the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in

shaping student engagement and learning outcomes. Lowenthal and Hodges (2015) note that the framework's emphasis on standardization could limit flexibility in addressing diverse learning needs. Additionally, Hills et al. (2022) note that implementing the QM framework can encounter barriers, including the need for extensive training and resistance among academic staff to the additional workload. These critiques indicate that QM requires contextual adaptations to specific institutional and student populations. When applied with sensitivity to institutional and student needs, however, QM can serve as a practical foundation for building inclusive, high-quality courses that better support international students' academic success.

Conceptual Framework

This study is guided by a conceptual framework centred on the QM framework and its potential to support inclusive instructional design in blended learning environments. The framework draws on four interconnected constructs: (1) the QM framework as a framework that may support quality assurance and faculty development; (2) blended learning as the instructional context; (3) inclusive course design as a guiding pedagogical principle; and (4) the role of academic staff in supporting international students through instructional decisions and course design.

QM Framework

In this study, the QM framework is used as a lens for exploring course design and instructional quality. It is a faculty-centred, research-informed quality assurance system designed to guide the development and evaluation of online and blended courses. The QM Higher Education Rubric emphasizes alignment across course elements, including objectives, materials, assessments, activities, and technologies, while also promoting accessibility, learner engagement, and measurable outcomes (QM, 2023). Although all publicly funded Ontario colleges have

adopted QM, its application in faculty practice varies (Weber, 2017). This study does not treat QM as an inclusion framework per se but instead explores whether academic staff perceive it as a useful tool to support inclusive course design for international students, as suggested in prior research (Gregory et al., 2020).

Blended Learning

The second construct framing this study is blended learning, which provides the instructional environment in which inclusive design practices and QM implementation intersect. Blended learning refers to the purposeful integration of face-to-face and online instructional methods to create flexible, student-centred learning experiences (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Accordingly, student-centred design is a core aspect of course development and shapes how learning objectives, activities, and assessments are structured to meet diverse learner needs. In blended courses, faculty and instructional designers typically share responsibility for providing clear guidance, culturally responsive materials, and flexible learning opportunities within course design (Baran & Correia, 2014; Lowe, 2023). Hrastinski (2019) describes blended learning as not merely a combination of formats, but a pedagogical strategy that deliberately integrates synchronous and asynchronous elements to improve engagement and access. Despite its flexibility, blended learning can pose challenges, especially for international students who may face difficulties with language, academic norms, or digital technologies (Dennen, 2024; Guo & Guo, 2017; Wu & Luo, 2022). Within this context, engagement and access are not inherent to blended learning environments but are shaped through course design and instructional practices. Faculty and instructional designers play important roles in facilitating learning experiences that support international student participation and access. For these reasons, well-structured course design is essential. When instructions are unclear and academic expectations are unfamiliar,

international students may struggle to participate fully, as they navigate new academic systems and learning environments, underscoring the need for course design that proactively addresses these barriers (Bouilheres et al., 2020; Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2017).

Inclusive Course Design

To address these challenges, this study draws on the principles of inclusive course design. As outlined by the Inclusive Design Research Centre (IDRC), inclusive course design refers to the intentional creation of learning experiences that are culturally responsive, accessible, and supportive of all students, particularly international learners. Inclusive design involves recognizing learner diversity, ensuring accessible processes, and promoting broader beneficial impacts through equitable and flexible course structures (IDRC, n.d.). These principles are especially relevant in blended and online environments, where barriers to participation, engagement and language support may emerge.

Role of Academic Staff

Academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, form the focal group for this study. Through their engagement (or lack thereof) with quality assurance frameworks such as QM, they influence how inclusive course design principles are interpreted and applied in blended learning environments. This study seeks to explore how academic staff perceive the QM framework as a form of professional development and how these perceptions relate to their approaches to course design and instruction for international students. The findings are intended to inform institutional strategies that enhance support for staff in providing inclusive, high-quality blended learning experiences.

The study is guided by four interconnected constructs (see Conceptual Framework section). Together, these constructs provide a lens for exploring how course design practices shape

inclusive teaching in blended and online learning environments for international students. This framework positions academic staff at the centre of inclusive instructional design and considers how the QM framework is perceived in relation to their work.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses an underexplored area in research and practice at the intersection of internationalization, instructional quality, and academic staff development within a Canadian college context (Legusov, 2023). Although international student enrolment has increased significantly over the past decade (CBIE, 2023), much of the existing literature has focused on universities, leaving the college sector comparatively underexamined, particularly regarding how academic staff are prepared to facilitate inclusive blended and online learning environments for diverse student populations (McGregor et al., 2022).

By centring the study on the Quality Matters (QM) framework, this research contributes insight into how a structured, evidence-informed quality assurance model may inform instructional design practices, professional development initiatives, and institutional strategies intended to foster inclusive blended learning environments for international students (Quality Matters, 2023; Shattuck et al., 2019). Importantly, the study did not position QM as a definitive solution; rather, it explored how academic staff perceived its relevance, strengths, and limitations within their teaching and course design practices. In doing so, the study highlights the complex relationship between quality assurance processes, institutional support structures, and the realities of academic work in the contemporary college sector.

The study is particularly relevant within publicly funded college systems where part-time and contract faculty comprise a substantial proportion of the instructional workforce and may have limited access to instructional design resources, professional learning opportunities, and

institutional supports (Singh, 2024; Usher, 2022). All 24 publicly funded colleges have adopted the QM framework through a province-wide initiative led by OntarioLearn, a consortium through which colleges collaboratively develop and deliver online courses across the province (OntarioLearn, 2024). Under this initiative, all new and substantially revised courses are expected to undergo review using the QM Higher Education Rubric (OntarioLearn, 2024).

Despite this shared commitment, previous research suggests that implementation remains uneven across institutions and departments, limiting the extent to which QM principles are consistently integrated into inclusive instructional design practices (Weber, 2017).

Scope of the Study

This qualitative case study focuses on Blue Jay College, a Canadian postsecondary institution with a substantial international student population. The study explores how academic staff, specifically faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the use of the QM framework in designing blended and online learning environments for international students. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a method that allows researchers to intentionally recruit individuals based on their expertise and relevance to the research questions. As defined by Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, purposive sampling involves “handpicking” cases based on their typicality or possession of characteristics being sought (2018, p. 218). Eligible participants included academic staff with experience in teaching or supporting international students in blended or online learning environments, as well as individuals involved in course design, instructional support, or curriculum development within the institution.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis, a widely used method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. The study is delimited to academic staff directly involved in

curriculum design and instructional development. Both part-time and full-time staff are included to reflect the instructional conditions of Ontario's college system. While this research does not assess student outcomes or evaluate QM implementation at the institutional level, it provides insight into how academic staff perceive the framework's relevance, applicability, and utility in supporting inclusive course design. Although limited to a single institutional setting, the findings are expected to yield transferable insights for broader conversations about instructional quality, internationalization, and academic staff development in the Canadian college sector.

Summary

This chapter introduced the context, rationale, and purpose of the study, situated within the broader landscape of globalization, internationalization, and institutional change in Canadian higher education. Recent policy changes by the Government of Canada, including a two-year cap on study permits and revisions to postgraduate work eligibility, have introduced uncertainty in future enrolment patterns. Nevertheless, international students continue to represent a significant portion of the student population, and academic staff are under increasing pressure to design inclusive and effective blended learning environments that reflect growing student diversity and evolving pedagogical standards (Baldwin & Ching, 2021).

Despite their central role in supporting international students, academic staff often lack access to structured professional development for teaching in blended and online learning environments. This gap is particularly evident in the college sector, where the increased enrolment of international students has not consistently been supported by investment in teaching and quality assurance.

This qualitative case study explores how the QM framework is perceived as a professional development tool to support academic staff in designing inclusive blended courses for

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international students. Anchored at Blue Jay College, the study focuses on academic staff perceptions of QM's utility, applicability, and potential to support instructional quality and alignment with institutional goals.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on internationalization, faculty development, inclusive pedagogy, and quality assurance frameworks in blended learning environments.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology, including participant selection, data collection, and analytical procedures used to address the research questions.

The study contributes to a deeper understanding of how the QM framework functions as a professional development tool to support inclusive course design in blended and online learning environments, highlighting its role in promoting clarity, structure, and consistency for international students in Canadian colleges.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This chapter critically reviews the scholarly literature that informs this study, which explores how academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the QM framework as a tool to support inclusive course design in blended learning environments. It considers how structured, research-informed frameworks such as QM may enhance instructional quality, particularly in relation to international students in Canadian higher education. Organized thematically, the chapter is structured into five parts. It begins by exploring how globalization has influenced higher education, particularly through an institutional emphasis on internationalization and its impact on pedagogical practices and policy priorities. It then considers the lived experiences of international students in Canadian colleges and universities, particularly in relation to cultural, linguistic, and digital challenges in blended and online environments. The chapter also examines the roles of academic staff in designing for diverse learners and highlights the need for professional development aligned with inclusive design for blended learning environments. It further evaluates the QM framework as a model for course design and quality assurance in blended learning. Finally, it identifies key gaps in the literature, particularly around how academic staff engage with quality assurance frameworks, and positions the current study to explore how research-informed frameworks like QM may support more inclusive approaches to course design and academic staff development in internationalized higher education contexts.

To conduct this literature review, a wide range of academic databases and platforms were consulted, including the Athabasca University Library, DISCOVER, Fanshawe College Library, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Semantic Scholar, SCOPUS, and Taylor & Francis Online. Relevant scholarly sources were organized and managed using the reference management tool

Mendeley. The search strategy included a combination of key terms aligned with the study's thematic areas: globalization, internationalization, international student experience in Canadian higher education, QM, blended and online learning, inclusive course design, faculty perceptions, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. These terms were used in various combinations to ensure comprehensive coverage of the literature across the domains relevant to the proposed research.

Effects of Globalization on Higher Education

Globalization has significantly shaped the expansion and transformation of higher education by enabling the integration of cultural, economic, and technological systems across national boundaries (Morris, 2009; Schiltmans, 2021; Trice et al., 2018). While globalization was initially promoted as a strategy to support socio-economic development in the Global South, the material benefits of educational mobility have largely benefited host nations, particularly through the financial contributions and cultural capital associated with international student recruitment (OECD, 2025). One major outcome of globalization is the massification of higher education, which has contributed to increased international student mobility and growing competition among institutions for students, funding, and global recognition (Altbach, 2016; de Wit, 2019). This expansion of higher education has supported new opportunities for international collaboration and cross-cultural exchange. At the same time, scholars note that globalization has also exposed persistent inequalities, particularly in how academic knowledge is produced and valued. Institutions in the Global North continue to dominate many dimensions of higher education, influencing what kinds of knowledge are considered legitimate and whose voices are privileged (Altbach, 2016; Marginson, 2016; Stein, 2019).

While globalization has helped diversify student populations and expand access to learning, it has also generated new challenges. These include uneven access to academic resources, differences in institutional prestige, and unequal participation in global research networks (Knight, 2013; Stein, 2019). Researchers have also expressed concerns that globalization may lead to a narrowing of cultural perspectives, increased market pressures, and the commodification of education shaped by international competition (Clarke & Kirby, 2022; de Wit & Jones, 2018).

Mobility of International Students

International student mobility has expanded significantly over the past decade. In OECD countries, the number of internationally mobile students increased from approximately 3.0 million in 2014 to more than 4.6 million by 2022 (OECD, 2025, p. 2). Canada has emerged as one of the top destinations for international education, attracting students largely from India, China, and the Philippines, which now represent the largest international cohorts in Canadian institutions. These students contribute substantially to campus diversity, Canada's knowledge economy, and demographic growth (Erudera, 2022; Statistics Canada, 2023).

Between 2008 and 2022, international student enrolment in Canada nearly tripled, rising from 280,170 to 844,444 students (Government of Canada, 2024). In response to this rapid growth, the federal government of Canada implemented the Integrated International Education Strategy (2019–2024), which seeks to better coordinate efforts among higher education institutions, government bodies, and industry stakeholders. The strategy emphasizes not only academic success but also post-graduation outcomes, including career readiness and pathways to labour market integration (Knight, 2023; Universities Canada, 2022).

Canada's approach to international education is shaped by national priorities such as immigration targets, economic development, and workforce needs. It also reflects a broader global trend: the alignment of internationalization with national competitiveness and economic policy (Garson, 2016; Government of Canada, 2019). As a result, international student mobility is increasingly understood not only in terms of educational exchange but also as part of a broader strategy to attract global talent and contribute to national economic development (Government of Canada, 2019). The rise in international student enrolment has led many colleges and universities to adopt internationalization strategies focused on recruitment, support services, and alignment with government policy objectives (Buckner, 2019; Guo & Guo, 2017).

Effects of Internationalization on Higher Education

Internationalization in higher education has evolved significantly over the past two decades, with its definitions and aims undergoing significant refinement. One of the most widely cited definitions is offered by Knight, who describes internationalization as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global and cross-cultural perspective into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education” (2004, p. 11). This definition emphasizes the incorporation of global perspectives into institutional practices and academic offerings. As the higher education landscape continues to shift, de Wit and Altbach (2021) propose a broader conceptualization. Their updated definition highlights the intentionality behind internationalization and its potential to enhance educational outcomes for all stakeholders:

The intentional process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions and delivery of higher education in order to enhance the quality of education and research for all students and staff, and to make a meaningful contribution to society. (de Wit et al., 2015, p. 29)

This expanded view reflects a growing recognition that internationalization is not only about integrating global perspectives but also about improving the overall quality of education and service functions (de Wit & Jones, 2018). However, the concept of “quality” in these widely used definitions is often assumed rather than critically examined, which can obscure the complex realities of implementing internationalization across diverse institutional and cultural contexts (de Wit, 2021). Mittelmeier and Jung (2022) call for a more holistic approach to internationalization that emphasizes fostering global citizenship and creating inclusive learning environments for international students, thereby extending how quality might be understood in practice. Similarly, Clarke and Kirby (2022) highlight the importance of designing internationalization strategies that support meaningful academic engagement and inclusive learning practices.

Although internationalization is often framed as a positive development (de Wit et al., 2015), it also presents several challenges. For example, Knight highlights concerns related to the rapid increase in international student enrolment in Canada, noting associated risks such as the emergence of degree mills, accreditation mills, and unethical recruitment and educational practices (2018, p. 87). These developments point to concerns about whether institutions have the capacity to manage rapid enrolment growth, and whether an emphasis on increasing numbers may come at the expense of inclusive practices (de Wit & Jones, 2018; Strielkowski, 2021). While internationalization strategies have succeeded in attracting larger numbers of international students, questions remain about how effectively these policies translate into meaningful academic and social support (de Wit & Altbach, 2021; Guo & Guo, 2017). The gap between institutional goals and students’ lived experiences points to the need for a deeper understanding of how effectively internationalization policies provide meaningful academic and social support.

Although proponents of internationalization argue that student diversity enriches the learning environment (Lourenco & Paiva, 2024), such perspectives often overlook the complexities that international students encounter, including linguistic, cultural, academic, and institutional barriers. To fully understand the impact of internationalization, it is necessary to consider not only policy intentions but also the everyday experiences of students navigating unfamiliar educational systems.

International Student Experience

International students in Canadian postsecondary institutions encounter a range of academic, social, and cultural challenges that shape their educational experiences. At a small Canadian college, Howe et al. (2023) identified key obstacles reported by international students, including financial strain, difficulty securing employment, limited academic support, challenges in cultural adjustment, social isolation, cultural shock, and experiences of discrimination (p. 122). Similar findings have emerged in other national contexts. For example, Fan et al. (2022) observed that international students in the United States often struggle with social isolation and difficulty navigating unfamiliar academic systems.

Although institutional interest in internationalization has expanded, the literature suggests that international student experiences are frequently oversimplified. Buckner and Chan (2024) argue that these students are often treated as a homogeneous group and viewed through a deficit-oriented lens, which overlooks their diverse backgrounds and valuable contributions to academic communities (p. 40). The deficit model attributes academic challenges to students' cultural or linguistic differences rather than institutional shortcomings. It has been widely critiqued as an outdated and problematic pedagogical stance (Davis & Museus, 2019; Kim, Buckner, & Montsion, 2023). This perspective can marginalize international students and obscure the role

that educational systems play in producing inequitable outcomes. In response, scholars advocate for reframing the discourse to emphasize the strengths and assets that international students bring to postsecondary education. Mittelmeier and Jung (2022) call for a shift toward a strength-based approach that values students' global perspectives and lived experiences. Similarly, de Wit and Jones (2018) suggest that international diversity should be regarded not as a challenge, but as an institutional asset that can enrich teaching, curriculum design, and campus culture. Yet beyond discourse, international students continue to encounter practical challenges in the classroom. Fan et al. (2022) report that students face difficulties adapting to unfamiliar instructional methods, developing independent learning strategies, and building relationships with instructors and peers. These challenges highlight the need for pedagogical approaches that are inclusive, flexible, and responsive to students' diverse educational needs.

Inclusive Pedagogical Strategies in Blended Learning Environments

Researchers argue that students benefit most from classroom environments that are structured, organized, and responsive to their academic needs (Bianchi & Martini, 2023; Yang et al., 2016). Effective strategies include clearly communicating course expectations, providing opportunities for formative feedback, and adopting learning approaches that foster engagement. For example, differentiated teaching methods have been proposed to accommodate diverse learning requirements, particularly in digitally mediated and blended environments (Caputi & Garrido Tejero, 2015). Peer mentoring programs have been shown to reduce isolation and enhance engagement (Menzies et al., 2014; Ragavan, 2014; Yuksel & Nascimento, 2018). Incorporating student feedback into course planning and design is another key strategy for improving relevance and inclusivity, as highlighted in earlier studies (Yang et al., 2016) and in more recent research focused on digital learning contexts (Lomellini et al., 2024).

Bianchi and Martini (2023) argue that institutional strategies must address both academic and social dimensions of the international student experience. They contend that tailored, context-specific supports are essential for promoting student success and well-being. These supports are often implemented through teaching and learning environments, which are directly shaped by faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. Given their role in shaping learning environments, academic staff are central to providing the instructional and pedagogical support that international students need to succeed. The next section explores blended learning environments and considers how academic staff can be supported in developing inclusive teaching practices that address the diverse needs of international learners.

Blended Learning: Definition, Design, and Faculty Support

Blended learning refers to the strategic integration of face-to-face and online instructional components, aiming to capitalize on the strengths of both modalities to support student learning (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Hrastinski, 2019). Rather than simply mixing online and face-to-face formats, blended learning is a pedagogical approach that enables flexible, engaging, and student-centred experiences (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Hrastinski, 2019). Recent studies underscore the importance of intentionally designed blended learning environments that align with research-informed frameworks such as QM. Liu et al. (2024) found that when blended courses were designed consistent with QM principles, with clearly structured content, aligned objectives, and active learning strategies, students reported higher satisfaction and improved outcomes. Similarly, Pei et al. (2025) demonstrated that professional development initiatives that support faculty in creating inclusive, community-oriented blended courses are essential for fostering student engagement and reducing isolation, especially among international learners. These findings reinforce the understanding that inclusive blended learning is not an automatic

outcome of combining modalities, but a product of intentional course design and instructional strategy.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the need to approach blended learning as more than a simple mix of face-to-face and online components, instead viewing it as a deliberate pedagogical strategy designed to foster interaction, flexibility, and engagement (Heilporn et al., 2021). In particular, the design of blended courses requires intentional alignment of synchronous and asynchronous elements to support diverse learning needs. Raes (2022) notes that both student and faculty experiences in hybrid and blended environments are significantly shaped by perceptions of presence, with social, cognitive, and teaching presence influencing learner satisfaction and participation. Together, these studies reinforce that blended learning environments benefit from thoughtful integration of multiple modalities, where faculty and instructional designers play a central role in creating equitable and engaging learning opportunities.

Academic Staff Support in Internationalized Learning Environments

While considerable research has examined the challenges faced by international students in higher education, far less attention has been given to how academic staff are supported in meeting these challenges, particularly within the context of blended and online learning in Canadian colleges (Legusov et al., 2023; Ma, 2022; McGregor et al., 2022). While institutional efforts to internationalize the curriculum are becoming more common, researchers note that these initiatives often lack cultural depth and do not fully reflect the lived experiences of international students (Liang, 2024). This critique supports the need to move beyond surface-level curriculum changes and toward approaches that directly address the everyday realities international students

face in classrooms, particularly in learning environments designed and delivered by academic staff.

Much of the existing literature focuses on university settings, leaving a gap in understanding the experiences and needs of faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants working in college environments. This gap is especially significant given the increasing reliance on digital learning platforms and the growing expectations for inclusive, high-quality course design. As institutions expand their internationalization strategies, understanding how academic staff are prepared through professional development initiatives becomes essential for ensuring equitable and supportive learning environments.

Professional Development Imperatives

Scholars argue that targeted professional development is a critical component of internationalization efforts in postsecondary education, particularly in supporting academic staff in addressing the needs of diverse student populations (Clarke & Kirby, 2022). However, studies have documented a lack of adequate support and training for academic staff in adapting pedagogical practices to meet the diverse needs of international learners (Ma, 2022; McGregor et al., 2022). This gap directly affects the quality of instruction and limits the effectiveness of institutional internationalization strategies (Yesufu, 2018). As Baldwin and Ching (2021) emphasize, staff need access to best-practice guidelines that promote high-quality and inclusive course design. Institutional leaders also play a key role in allocating professional development resources, especially those that support inclusive instructional practices (Gawronski et al., 2016; McGregor et al., 2022). As digital learning has become central to postsecondary education, academic staff must be equipped to use educational technologies to support international students as they navigate unfamiliar academic systems and learning environments (Martin et al., 2019).

To this end, Baldwin and Ching (2021) and McGregor et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of ongoing professional development that helps faculty design inclusive and accessible digital learning experiences for diverse learners.

Instructional Designers as Inclusion Advocates

The literature also highlights the vital role of instructional designers in this process. Instructional designers are instrumental in promoting accessibility and inclusion, often advocating for student needs that instructors may not fully anticipate or recognize (McGregor et al., 2022). This finding is consistent with research indicating that faculty are often hired for their subject matter expertise but may not have formal training in online pedagogy or inclusive course design (Lowenthal & Lomellini, 2023; McGregor et al., 2022).

Precarity and Professional Development Opportunities

Contract Faculty and Instructional Expectations

These challenges in supporting international students through inclusive teaching practices are further compounded by the precarious employment conditions of academic staff in Canadian colleges. In Ontario, approximately 68% of faculty are employed on a part-time or contract basis (Usher, 2022). Despite their significant contributions to student learning, contract faculty often lack access to professional development, institutional resources, and instructional support (Community College Research Centre, 2018; Willson et al., 2024). Nevertheless, they are frequently expected to meet the same instructional expectations as full-time colleagues (Alshehri, 2020). Not surprisingly, Jin and Schieder (2017) found notable differences in how full-time and part-time faculty perceive and address challenges associated with teaching international students. Given the large proportion of part-time faculty, institutions may need to adopt more flexible and responsive professional development approaches, offering options that accommodate varied

schedules and address the evolving instructional needs of faculty working in blended and online formats (Community College Research Centre, 2018; Usher, 2022).

Faculty Preferences for Professional Development Delivery

While online modules are commonly used for faculty training, research suggests that instructors often prefer individualized consultations with instructional designers over self-paced formats (Teclehaimanot & Marshall, 2020). This finding underscores the importance of professional development that is both responsive and context-sensitive, aligning with faculty needs, instructional challenges, and institutional goals.

The emphasis on professional development and quality course design aligns closely with the objectives of the QM framework. The framework provides structured, research-informed guidance for developing high-quality blended and online courses, with a particular focus on clarity, accessibility, and learner engagement. For institutions serving large numbers of international students, QM's standards offer academic staff a practical approach to addressing the varied needs of a diverse student population.

The QM Framework

The integration of the QM framework across institutions has yielded varying degrees of success, depending on institutional context and implementation strategies (Driscoll, 2023).

Benefits of the QM Framework

The QM framework provides a structured, research-informed methodology for designing and evaluating online and blended courses. Its emphasis on clarity, alignment, and continuous improvement is particularly valuable for addressing the instructional needs of international students (Lowenthal & Hodges, 2015; Westine et al., 2019). By encouraging regular course

review and refinement, QM supports institutions in responding to the evolving needs of diverse student populations (Zumor & Wahed, 2015).

However, the implementation of the QM framework presents ongoing challenges. Driscoll (2023) found that while faculty perceived QM resources and instructional design support as useful, gaps remained in access to culturally responsive tools, such as translation supports and diverse multimedia content. The study emphasized the importance of additional professional development that specifically addresses the needs of international students, pointing to a disconnect between institutional support and faculty capacity for designing inclusive courses. Zimmerman et al. (2020) argue that institutions must prioritize quality course design, provide ongoing professional development aligned with adopted standards, and embed internal reviews as part of a broader quality assurance strategy. Similarly, Driscoll (2023) argues that institutional support is essential for moving from training to meaningful adoption, especially in preparing academic staff to meet the unique challenges of teaching international students.

Notably, faculty at community colleges that promoted faculty-led quality assurance initiatives reported more positive outcomes of QM implementation compared to those operating under top-down administrative mandates (Gregory et al., 2020, p. 85). Instructional designers play a critical role in this process, particularly when developing courses with diverse international student populations. As Cai and Robertson (2021) explain, “an instructional designer provides pedagogical and technical expertise to support the faculty members [in] implement[ing] their vision of the course” (p. 184). This collaborative approach not only enhances faculty confidence in content and technical delivery but also cultivates the development of culturally responsive and accessible online learning environments.

Challenges of Implementing QM

Despite its documented benefits, the implementation of the QM framework presents several practical challenges. These include the need for extensive training for academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, as well as potential resistance stemming from increased workload and shifts in established teaching practices (Hills et al., 2022). Additionally, further research is needed to examine the practical implications of QM integration across diverse institutional contexts (Tight, 2022; Huang et al., 2022). As Stracke (2019) emphasizes, definitions of “quality” in higher education are context-dependent and should be informed by the experiences and perspectives of all stakeholders, including international students and the academic staff who support them.

Gaps in the Literature

The literature review began with a discussion of globalization and its influence on postsecondary education, particularly in relation to international student mobility. This was followed by an examination of internationalization, which emphasized how institutional strategies have increasingly focused on global recruitment, often without fully addressing the lived experiences of international students. Despite extensive scholarship on internationalization in higher education, several key gaps remain. First, the Canadian college sector is significantly under-researched compared to universities, particularly in studies related to internationalization and inclusive instructional practices (Legusov et al., 2023). Second, there is limited research on the implementation and impact of the QM framework within college settings (Brooks & Grady, 2022). Third, few studies have explored how academic staff engage with QM to support international students in blended learning environments (Hills et al., 2022). Fourth, the literature highlights a persistent lack of professional development opportunities for academic staff,

especially among part-time faculty, despite growing expectations for inclusive, high-quality course design (McGregor et al., 2022). For example, McMahon (2021) found that academic staff who completed at least 20 hours of professional development were more effective in designing and delivering blended learning instruction. Finally, a misalignment remains between institutional policies related to internationalization and the actual experiences of international students, indicating a need for more practice-informed research on how instructional design and faculty development can better support students (Garson, 2016; James, 2018).

The proposed study aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for improving professional development strategies for academic staff to enhance the quality of blended learning environments. Employing qualitative case study methodology and semi-structured interviews, this research explores the perceptions of academic staff who support international students. By analyzing their experiences with the QM framework, where applicable, alongside current professional development practices, this study aims to inform strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive blended learning environments at a Canadian college.

Conclusion

This literature review has examined the evolving landscape of internationalization in postsecondary education, with particular attention to the challenges faced by international students and the vital role academic staff play in supporting them. Several gaps in the existing research have been identified, especially within the underexplored context of Canadian colleges. These gaps underscore the importance of adopting more inclusive, practice-informed approaches to faculty development that address the diverse needs of international learners in blended learning contexts. In response, this study employs a qualitative case study approach to investigate how academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum

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consultants, perceive the use of the QM framework as a professional development tool. Through semi-structured interviews, the research explores academic staff experiences with blended learning, professional development, and inclusive course design. The goal is to develop actionable recommendations that enhance instructional quality and foster more inclusive and supportive learning environments for international students in Canadian college settings.

Chapter 3 outlines the study's methodology, including the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical procedures. This approach enables an in-depth exploration of academic staff perceptions and provides insight into how quality assurance frameworks like QM can be implemented to support inclusive and equitable teaching practices. The findings are expected to inform institutional policies and professional development strategies aimed at improving educational outcomes for international students in digitally mediated postsecondary learning environments.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methodology used to explore academic staff perceptions of the QM framework in blended learning environments that support international students. It restates the study's purpose and research questions, explains the rationale for the research design, and articulates the philosophical assumptions of axiology, ontology, and epistemology that inform this interpretive qualitative inquiry. Subsequently, the researcher's positionality and the rationale for selecting a case study methodology are presented. The chapter continues with an overview of the case boundaries, participant sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and the process for analyzing the data. Trustworthiness, ethical considerations, and limitations are discussed to ensure methodological transparency. The chapter then outlines the interpretive case study design used to explore academic staff perspectives on the application of the QM framework in blended learning environments. This approach aligns with the study's focus on enhancing instructional quality for international students.

Qualitative Case Study Approach

This study employs a qualitative case study methodology, selected for its capacity to generate a detailed, contextualized understanding of how faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants perceive the QM framework in the context of blended course design for international students. Case study research is well suited for exploring real-life bounded systems, particularly when the focus is on how individuals interpret practices within specific institutional settings (Merriam, 1998, 2009; Yazan, 2015). The study is designed as a single, instrumental case study situated within a Canadian college, referred to as Blue Jay College. The case is bounded by the institutional context and the perspectives of academic staff involved in blended learning environments that include international students. The goal is not to evaluate the implementation

of QM at scale but to explore the subjective interpretations and perceived relevance of QM as a resource for inclusive instructional design. This study draws on the comparative analyses of case study approaches provided by Yazan (2015) and Harrison et al. (2017) both of whom discuss important distinctions among the approaches of Stake, Merriam, and Yin. It incorporates elements from both Merriam's (1998, 2009) and Yin's (2018) approaches while remaining grounded in an interpretive and constructivist orientation. Unlike Yin's more post-positivist orientation, Stake's (1995, 2006) approach emphasizes understanding meaning from the participants' perspectives and generating thick, context-specific descriptions.

Such design supports the use of semi-structured interviews to gather rich, qualitative data from faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants directly involved in curriculum design and instructional quality processes. Emphasis is placed on exploring multiple perspectives and constructing a nuanced understanding of how QM is perceived in a real-world educational setting, reinforcing the interpretive nature of the research.

Philosophical Assumptions: Axiology, Ontology, and Epistemology

The study is guided by an interpretivist paradigm and informed by interrelated philosophical assumptions of axiology, ontology, and epistemology. Axiologically, I acknowledge that inquiry is inherently value-laden, shaped by the researcher's background and positionality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, pp. 110-111). As a novice researcher with experience as a part-time faculty member, instructional designer, Learning Management System (LMS) administrator, and designated course reviewer for OntarioLearn through the QM framework, I bring informed perspectives to the topic of inclusive course design in blended learning environments. However, I also recognize that these experiences may introduce bias. To mitigate this, I have engaged in ongoing reflexivity (Berger, 2015), using practices such as audio journaling and peer debriefing

to consider how my perspectives and assumptions may shape the research process and interpretation of the data, and to support transparency and trustworthiness (Nowell et al., 2017).

Ontologically, this study adopts a relativist position, assuming that reality is subjective and contextually constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). Academic staff may interpret the relevance and utility of the QM framework differently depending on their roles, professional experiences, and interactions with international students in blended learning environments. The varied perspectives of academic staff participants are central to understanding how QM is perceived and how it may function as a potential professional development tool for supporting blended course design that is inclusive and pedagogically responsive to the needs of international students. The interpretivist stance underpins a research design that seeks to understand multiple realities rather than generate universal truths. Epistemologically, the study aligns with a constructivist view, which holds that knowledge is constructed through the interactions between individuals and their environments (Crotty, 1998; Harrison et al., 2015). Rather than seeking objective facts, this research values participants' interpretations and meaning making. This emphasis on shared understanding informs the use of qualitative interviews and thematic analysis to co-construct insights grounded in lived experience. Together, these philosophical assumptions form the foundation for the study's design and guide the methodological choices throughout the research process.

Interpretivist Paradigm

This study is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which prioritizes understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences and construct meaning within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The interpretive paradigm assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood from the

perspective of those experiencing it. As Cohen et al. (2018) explain, the goal of interpretive research is to “understand the subjective world of human experience” (p. 19). In this study, the focus is on exploring how academic staff perceive and make meaning from the QM framework within the context of blended learning environments that include international students. These perceptions may reflect varying levels of familiarity and engagement in QM-related practices, shaped by participants’ professional roles and experiences. The interpretivist stance supports a collaborative researcher-participant relationship, positioning the researcher as a co-constructor of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). This paradigm informs the study’s design and reinforces its emphasis on eliciting rich, contextual insights into how academic staff experience and interpret professional development tools aimed at enhancing course quality and inclusivity in blended learning environments.

Researcher Positionality

As a novice researcher, I bring a professional background as an instructional designer, LMS administrator, and instructor of international students in blended and online learning environments. In my role as a designated course reviewer for OntarioLearn through the QM framework, I have developed a practical understanding of how quality assurance tools can support inclusive and accessible course design. These experiences have shaped my interest in faculty development, quality frameworks, and international student learning.

I acknowledge that my prior involvement with QM and experience supporting academic staff may introduce certain biases in how I interpret participant responses. To address this, I engaged in reflexive practices throughout the research process (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity is supported by recent guidance on researcher positionality and reflexive practices (Holmes, 2020; Dodgson, 2019), as well as strategies recommended in foundational qualitative research for ensuring

trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), such as audio journaling, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail. These practices aim to enhance transparency, strengthen rigour, and ensure that interpretations remain grounded in participants' perspectives rather than my own assumptions (Nowell et al., 2017).

During interviews, I remained attentive to my potential influence on the dialogue and intentionally facilitated an environment that encouraged participants to share authentic perspectives on the QM framework and their experiences supporting international students. This reflexive and dialogic approach aligns with the interpretivist paradigm, which views the researcher as an active co-constructor of meaning (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) and reflects the study's commitment to capturing diverse and situated realities. Informed by this interpretive stance and my positionality, the following research questions guided the inquiry.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been designed to elicit rich, descriptive accounts of participants' experiences and perceptions. They are consistent with the study's interpretivist orientation and its aim to understand meaning-making within a specific institutional context.

1. How do academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the institutional supports available for designing blended learning experiences for international students?
2. What challenges and barriers do academic staff encounter in designing and delivering blended learning experiences for international students?
3. How do academic staff perceive the role of the QM framework in supporting inclusive course design and professional development within blended and online learning environments?

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge and seeks to understand how individuals make sense of their experiences in context (Schwandt, 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach aligns with the study's goal of exploring how academic staff perceive the QM framework as a tool to support inclusive course design for international students in blended learning environments. Rather than striving for generalizability, this design aims to generate context-rich insights that illuminate meaning-making processes within a specific institutional setting.

Case Study Methodology

A single-site interpretive case study was selected as the methodological approach, drawing on Stake's (1995, 2005) interpretive approach to qualitative case study research. As noted by Yazan (2015) and Creswell and Poth (2018), Stake's approach emphasizes understanding the bounded case through in-depth, holistic inquiry that centres on the subjective interpretations and the multiple perspectives they bring to the case. The case study methodology supports the exploration of academic staff members' perceptions and experiences of engaging with a quality assurance framework such as QM in a real-world institutional context. It also recognizes that some participants may have little or no prior familiarity with QM. The case in this study is bounded by one Canadian public college that has adopted QM as part of a provincial quality assurance initiative and by the perspectives of academic staff designing or supporting blended learning for international students (Yazan, 2015). This aligns with the researcher's goal of capturing how academic staff perceive, understand, or respond to the QM framework in the

context of designing inclusive and high-quality instruction for international students in blended learning environments.

Site Selection and Context

The study took place at a publicly funded college in Ontario, Canada, one of 24 institutions that have formally adopted the QM framework (Weber, 2017) (see Appendix A). The institution offers a wide range of academic programs that incorporate blended learning strategies, all of which are supported by a centralized LMS, positioning the LMS as an integral component of instructional delivery. The site was selected based for its alignment with the study's focus and the presence of the QM framework within institutional processes. This context presents a meaningful setting for exploring how academic staff perceive the usefulness of QM in enhancing instructional design for international learners.

Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

This study used a combination of purposive sampling to select participants from three key academic roles at Blue Jay College: faculty members, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. Purposive sampling is a non-probability approach in which participants are intentionally selected because they possess characteristics or experiences that are directly relevant to the research objectives (Patton, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Eligible participants had to meet at least one of the following inclusion criteria:

- Direct involvement in teaching blended or online courses that enrol international students;
- Experience designing or supporting blended learning environments for international students; or

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- Institutional responsibilities related to course quality, inclusive pedagogy, or instructional development.

Faculty members, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants were selected because together they represented academic staff directly involved in teaching, course design, instructional support, and blended and online learning practices within the college. Including participants with varied professional experiences and responsibilities provided multiple perspectives on instructional quality, course design, and support for international students within blended and online learning environments. These perspectives strengthened the depth and contextual richness of the findings and interpretive understanding of the institutional case (Carter et al., 2014; Stake, 1995).

Recruitment began with outreach to known colleagues who met these criteria. Recruitment of curriculum consultants focused on those affiliated with the institution's Centre for Academic Excellence. All potential participants were contacted through standardized email invitation (see Appendix B).

When additional participants were required, a snowball sampling technique was employed. Snowball sampling is a recruitment method in which initial participants who meet the inclusion criteria are invited to refer other individuals with relevant expertise (Noy, 2008; Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018). This approach can help identify participants who were not reached through the initial recruitment process relevant expertise.

Recruitment resulted in a final sample of 10 participants, including three faculty members, three instructional designers, three curriculum consultants, and one additional part-time faculty member.

The combination of purposive and snowball sampling ensured that the participants provided context-rich, experience-based perspectives relevant to the study's aim of exploring academic staff perceptions of the QM framework in blended course design. Given the researcher's prior professional experience in instructional design and teaching international students at the institution, the potential for bias is acknowledged and addressed in the Research Positionality section, where strategies such as ongoing reflexivity and peer debriefing are outlined as means of supporting transparency and trustworthiness.

Ethical considerations

The study explores how academic staff perceive the QM framework within the context of designing blended learning experiences for international students. While the topic is not considered high-risk, standard ethical practices were followed to ensure participant and institutional anonymity. The ethical conduct of this study is paramount; ethics approval was obtained from Athabasca University (Appendix D), as well as Blue Jay College. The approval of both institutions ensured that the research met the standards of both institutions and addressed any potential conflicts of interest arising from the researcher's employment at the college. The study adhered to ethical guidelines and principles set out in the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2* (2022):

1. Informed consent: All participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, methods, and potential risks. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form indicating their voluntary agreement to participate (see Appendix C).
2. Voluntary participation: Participants were informed that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

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3. Confidentiality and Anonymity: Pseudonyms were used for the college and the academic staff; any institutional data was redacted from findings and transcripts.
4. Data Security: All data, including interview recordings, transcripts and consent forms, are stored securely in password-protected cloud storage for a period of five years. Access is limited to the researcher and academic supervisor(s).
5. Minimization of Risk: Care was taken to ensure that participants are not put at risk. Ethics approval was obtained from Athabasca University and Blue Jay College to further safeguard the participants' well-being.
6. Conflict of Interest: Given the researcher's affiliation with the institution, interviews were conducted outside regular working hours. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no impact on participants' employment status or evaluations.

These principles align with TCPS 2's emphasis on respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice in the conduct of research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2022).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative research, multiple strategies were used guided by the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined in Stahl and King's (2020) synthesis of Lincoln and Guba's framework:

- Credibility was supported through member checking, in which participants were invited to review their interview transcripts and provide feedback for accuracy.

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- Transferability was achieved through thick descriptions of the research context, participant roles, and institutional setting, allowing readers to assess relevance to other educational contexts.
- Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation of the research process, including the development of an audit trail and a chronological research log.
- Confirmability was reinforced through ongoing reflexive journaling and regular debriefing meetings with the supervisory team to examine the influence of the researcher's perspectives on the interpretation of findings.

Together, these measures enhanced the study's methodological integrity and supported the alignment between the research questions, interpretive case study methodology, and interpretation of the findings.

Data Collection Method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with faculty members, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants at Blue Jay College. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they aligned closely with the interpretive case study design and the research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). The study sought to understand how academic staff perceived and experienced the Quality Matters (QM) framework in relation to instructional quality and support for international students within blended and online learning environments. As a result, a method capable of generating rich, descriptive accounts of participants' experiences was considered most appropriate.

Alternative approaches, including document analysis and content analysis, were considered during the design of the study. Such approaches can provide valuable insight into institutional policies, course materials, and course design artifacts. However, the focus of this study was on

academic staff perceptions, experiences, and interpretations rather than institutional documentation. While course outlines, LMS content, and other instructional materials may reveal aspects of course design practice, they cannot fully capture how academic staff understand, experience, and respond to the institutional conditions that shape those practices. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions aligned with the research questions and designed to elicit participants' perceptions of instructional quality and the QM framework, as well as their experiences supporting international students in blended and online learning environments. The semi-structured format provided consistency across interviews while allowing flexibility to probe for clarification, elaboration, and reflection throughout the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Consistent with interpretive qualitative inquiry, participants were viewed as individuals with direct experience supporting international students in blended and online learning environments (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995). Their experiences and perspectives provided insight into how academic staff understood instructional quality, institutional supports, and the role of the QM framework within these contexts. Collectively, these perspectives informed the study's understanding of the research questions within the bounded institutional case.

Interview Structure

Semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and participants were offered the option of participating either in person or virtually, depending on participant availability and preference (Archibald et al., 2019). Providing participants with a choice of interview format was intended to enhance accessibility and convenience. Although both options were offered, all participants elected to participate virtually using Microsoft Teams. Interviews began with

introductory questions about participants' roles and experience with international students in blended and online learning environments, followed by focused questions related to instructional quality, institutional supports, and their engagement with the QM framework.

The interview guide was shaped by the study's research questions and grounded in the existing literature on instructional quality and international student experiences (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent, using the built-in recording and transcription features in Microsoft Teams. Participants had the option of keeping their cameras on or off during the interview. To enhance transcription accuracy and completeness, interviews were also recorded using Otter.ai, and transcripts from both systems were compared during the review process. This process also supported early familiarization with the data.

Pseudonyms were used throughout to ensure anonymity (Saunders et al., 2015). Data collection took place over a six-week period between August 2025 and September 2025.

Data Analysis Approach

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The six phases include familiarization with the data, initial coding, theme development, theme refinement, defining themes, and producing the report. NVivo 15 was used to support the organization, coding, and analysis of qualitative data, offering a structured audit trail and enhancing transparency in data interpretation (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013; Maher et al., 2018). NVivo also supported analytic rigor by providing traceability throughout the coding process (Houghton et al., 2017).

Thematic analysis facilitated the identification of recurrent patterns related to academic staff perceptions of the QM framework within blended and online learning environments that support international students. Although participants represented different academic staff roles, including

faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, the analysis was conducted across the dataset rather than comparatively by role because the study sought to understand the broader institutional experience of academic staff within the bounded case.

Limitations and Delimitations

As a single-site case study, the findings of this research are not generalizable to other institutions nor is generalization the intent of qualitative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Instead, the study aims to provide deep, contextual insights into how academic staff perceive and apply the QM framework within a specific institutional setting. The small sample size and reliance on self-reported data may introduce limitations related to subjectivity and recall bias, which are common concerns in qualitative research that relies on participants' memories and personal reflections (Hassan, 2005; Maxwell, 2013). The study is delimited to one publicly funded Canadian college (Blue Jay College) and focuses specifically on three academic staff groups: faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. Other stakeholders such as students, administrators, and support staff are outside the scope. The research focuses specifically on blended and online learning environments supported by the institutional LMS and does not include face-to-face or fully online courses taught outside of the LMS ecosystem.

Overview of the Final Thesis

The final dissertation is structured to reflect the interpretive case study methodology and the study's findings. The subsequent Chapter 4 presents the thematic analysis of participant interviews, organized by key patterns aligned with the research questions. Chapter 5 then provides an interpretive discussion of these findings in relation to the scholarly literature on instructional quality, blended and online learning, and international student support. Chapter 6

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presents the study's conclusions, outlines implications for practice at Blue Jay College, and offers recommendations for future research, particularly regarding the effective application of quality assurance frameworks such as QM in blended and online learning environments for international learners.

Chapter 4: Presentation of Research

This chapter presents findings from a single Canadian college that explored how academic staff perceive the Quality Matters framework in supporting international students in blended and online learning environments. Data were drawn from semi-structured interviews with ten participants, including three faculty members, three instructional designers, three curriculum consultants, and one part-time faculty member. Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Analysis involved repeated familiarization with the interview transcripts, iterative coding, and the development and refinement of themes through reflection and memoing. As mentioned above, NVivo 15 supported data management and the maintenance of a clear audit trail.

Although participants represented different academic staff roles within the institution, the findings were analyzed across the dataset rather than comparatively by role. This approach reflected the purpose of the study, which was to explore shared institutional conditions shaping blended and online learning design, instructional quality, and support for international students within a bounded institutional context. While role-specific perspectives were considered throughout the analysis, substantial overlap across participant accounts supported the development of themes reflecting common experiences related to instructional quality, inclusive course design, and the use of the Quality Matters framework.

The findings are organized around three interrelated themes identified within "Blue Jay College".

- Consistency and Structure Supporting International Student Success
- Gaps Between Instructional Expectations and Institutional Supports
- Sustaining Quality Under Pressure and Precarity

4.1 Description of Participants

The study included ten participants from three academic staff groups at Blue Jay College: faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. These academic staff groups contribute to teaching, course design, and curriculum development, all of which shape blended and online learning environments. Faculty participants were responsible for teaching and assessment, instructional designers supported course design and accessibility, and curriculum consultants worked at the program and institutional level to support quality, coherence, and faculty development. One participant was employed as a part-time faculty member, reflecting the increasingly common reliance on contract teaching staff within the institution.

Participants varied in their professional backgrounds, length of service, and experience with course design. Curriculum consultants were typically faculty members prior to their current role and therefore brought experience from both instructional and institutional perspectives. Some participants had extensive experience in blended and online learning, while others described developing these practices through experience and self-directed professional development.

Participants also differed in their familiarity with Quality Matters (QM). In some cases, exposure to QM was shaped by the presence of local champions or leaders promoting course design and quality initiatives within programs or departments. Other participants described encountering QM more informally through professional development or peer collaboration. The differences in background and experience shaped the perspectives brought to the interviews. During the thematic analysis, the variation became evident in how academic staff described their experiences of institutional supports, time, and authority in relation to instructional decisions and quality expectations.

To protect confidentiality, participants are identified by role and assigned a numerical code (e.g., F1, ID1, CC1, PTF1) to preserve anonymity. This approach allows participants' perspectives to be understood by their academic role while maintaining confidentiality. The following section maps the three research questions onto the themes that emerged from the analysis, showing how participants' experiences cut across questions, roles, and institutional contexts. Attention is given to how these experiences shape teaching, course design and curriculum development practices that support international students in blended and online learning environments.

4.2 Alignment of Research Questions and Themes

Three research questions guided this qualitative case study:

1. How do academic staff, including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the institutional supports available for designing blended learning experiences for international students?
2. What challenges and barriers do academic staff encounter in designing and delivering blended and online learning experiences for international students?
3. How do academic staff perceive the role of the Quality Matters (QM) framework in supporting inclusive course design and professional development in blended and online learning environments?

Themes and sub-themes related to these research questions were developed through repeated reading of the transcripts, reflexive coding, and ongoing reflection across all interviews. Three themes were developed from this analysis.

The first theme, *Consistency and Structure Supporting International Student Success*, reflects participants' emphasis on clear course organization, predictable navigation, and shared templates

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as mechanisms that support international student learning in blended and online learning environments

The second theme, *Gaps Between Instructional Expectations and Institutional Supports*, captures participants' experiences of institutional expectations for quality teaching that were not consistently supported by coordinated onboarding, professional development, or workload support.

The third theme, *Sustaining Quality Under Pressure and Precarity*, reflects broader institutional conditions, including workload pressures, staff turnover, and precarious employment arrangements, that participants described as affecting the sustainability of instructional quality.

Table 4.1 summarizes the themes, illustrative participant voices, and their alignment with the research questions. The themes are presented in the following sections with supporting participant quotations that illustrate how academic staff understand instructional quality, institutional support, and the conditions shaping the sustainability of inclusive practices for international students in blended and online learning environments.

Table 4.1

Summary of Themes, Illustrative Participant Voice, and Alignment with Research Questions

Theme	Illustrative Participant Voice	Research Question(s) Addressed
Consistency and Structure Supporting International Student Success	"Having that predictable space where everything is located is important... it's easier for students to understand and follow because it is all in one space." (Faculty)	RQ1
Gaps Between Instructional Expectations and Institutional Supports	"I feel like it's on me to support them. There's no real help." (Part-Time Faculty)	RQ1, RQ2

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Sustaining Quality Under Pressure and Precarity	“Quality Matters is written down somewhere as our standard, but we haven’t been good at holding people accountable to it.” (Instructional Designer)	RQ2, RQ3
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The themes collectively address the three research questions, although the extent to which each theme aligns with specific questions varies. Together, they reflect the interconnected nature of the participants’ experiences across roles and institutional contexts. Although participant

voices from multiple roles were represented within each theme, participants varied in how they experienced these issues depending on their academic roles and responsibilities. Within the first theme, faculty often framed consistency in relation to student navigation and classroom efficiency, while curriculum consultants connected consistency to program-level coherence and institutional expectations. At the same time, participants across all roles highlighted the importance of shared templates and standardized course structures as practical mechanisms for supporting both student success and instructional consistency.

Within the second theme, both full-time and part-time faculty emphasized the practical challenge of meeting expectations within limited workload time and unpaid course development work. For these participants, expectations were frequently tied to course information sheets that map vocational outcomes and specify what students must be able to demonstrate upon course completion. These vocational outcomes are established through provincial ministry standards, meaning that core learning outcomes are externally defined rather than locally determined. Instructional designers and curriculum consultants, in contrast, focused more strongly on gaps in onboarding, training, and the coordinated institutional supports required to sustain instructional quality.

Within the third theme, instructional designers and curriculum consultants frequently described how time pressures, ongoing staff turnover, and the absence of institution-wide standards made it difficult to sustain course quality and continuity across programs. Curriculum consultants also emphasized the ongoing need to onboard new instructors and rebuild course practices rather than extending prior improvements across programs.

4.3 Theme 1: Consistency and Structure Supporting International Student Success

Participants described consistent course design, including standardized layouts across courses, as enabling international students in blended and online learning environments to focus on learning rather than expending effort locating core course information such as assignment instructions, learning activities, schedules, and assessment requirements. In blended and online learning environments, cognitive load refers to the mental effort required to process information and navigate instructional materials, and it increases when course design introduces unnecessary complexity or unclear structure (Surbakti et al., 2024). Within blended and online learning environments, consistency was perceived as contributing to lower student stress and reduced cognitive load by minimizing the mental effort required to navigate the course environment. When course structure was predictable, participants described students as focusing more on engaging with course content rather than searching for materials and instructions.

4.3.1 Course Design and Navigation

Predictable course design and navigation were described as important factors in helping international students move more easily through blended and online courses. Participants emphasized that consistent course organization, shared templates, and standardized layouts reduced confusion for international students and supported smoother transitions between courses and programs. An instructional designer described developing a department-wide blueprint

intended to support both instructors and students as they moved between programs, explaining that it was designed to be “consistent across our department to make it easier both for faculty moving between programs and for students moving from one program to another” (ID1). Within this structure, weekly organization and clear wayfinding were seen as central to student success. As one instructional designer explained, when course elements are organized predictably, “anybody and everybody can be successful, and students are able to locate information independently, and if questions arise, the answer should often be right there” (ID1). The emphasis on consistency was reinforced by another instructional designer, who noted that “students need a sense of belonging. Structure is one way we can give that to them” (ID2).

The emphasis on predictability was echoed by other participants, who described the importance of having a clearly organized and centralized course space. A faculty member mentioned that, “having that predictable space where everything is located is important... it’s easier for students to understand and follow because it is all in one space” (F1). When such predictability was absent, the same participant reported that “students get confused ...they feel like they have to relearn it every time” (F1). This concern was also reflected by another faculty member, who observed that “inconsistent use of a common format becomes a barrier because students feel like they have to relearn the system every time” (F3).

At the broader program level, shared course formats were viewed as supporting continuity and setting shared expectations for students. As one curriculum consultant explained, “if all faculty follow a similar format, students know what to expect from course to course” (CC1). Consistency was described as reducing the need for students to continuously reorient themselves, allowing attention to shift from navigating each new course to engaging with learning across a program. Participants suggested that this predictability may be particularly important for

international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations in blended and online learning environments.

4.3.2 Reducing Cognitive Load for International Students

Course structure and consistency were frequently linked to cognitive load, particularly for international students navigating unfamiliar educational systems, languages, and learning technologies. Participants described unclear navigation, inconsistent layouts, and shifting expectations as requiring students to expend significant mental effort simply to understand how a course operates. For international students without prior experience in blended and online learning environments, this lack of clarity was described as creating uncertainty about how to participate. As one curriculum consultant explained, learning online can feel like “I do not know what I am supposed to do” (CC3). This challenge was also reflected by an instructional designer, who noted that “digital native just doesn’t exist...lots of people domestic or international are not comfortable with technology” (ID2), further emphasizing the complexity of navigating blended and online learning environments.

For international students, participants suggested that this effort was often compounded by additional demands related to language processing, cultural adjustment, and differences in prior educational experiences compared with students already familiar with the local academic context. Several participants emphasized that these demands had to be managed simultaneously, intensifying the mental effort required to navigate courses. A curriculum consultant highlighted that international students were not always given sufficient time to process information, explaining that “English is not their first language, so they need more time to translate in their head and formulate answers” (CC1).

Participants also identified gaps in awareness of institutional language supports as contributing to language-related challenges international students may experience when navigating course materials and expectations. A faculty member observed that some international students struggled with language demands beyond what formal testing had indicated and often relied on unsupported tools as a result. As this participant explained, “Some of the students do not have the level of language ability that they previously tested at. A lot of students are using language tools and supports... and they are getting caught. I think if more international students were aware of supports like academic Grammarly, it could help prevent some of those incidents” (F1).

Across interviews, participants emphasized that language-related challenges were not only shaped by course content, but by how blended and online learning environments were organized and how expectations were communicated. When the course structure was unclear, existing challenges related to language processing, unfamiliar learning platforms and adjustments to new academic expectations created unnecessary confusion for international students. Conversely, participants suggested that shared and predictable course design practices could reduce unnecessary cognitive effort by allowing these students to focus more fully on learning rather than figuring out how to navigate the course environment. As one curriculum consultant reflected, when students are able to learn “one effective way to navigate and participate, that approach can carry across courses, reducing confusion and supporting engagement” (CC3).

4.3.3 Consistency Supporting Flexible Teaching Practice

Across interviews, consistency was framed as supporting teaching practice rather than constraining it. Course structure was described as intentional design work that helps instructors focus on core elements of a course while remaining attentive to the needs of international

students. One instructional designer emphasized that consistency supports reflective decision-making rather than rigid compliance, explaining “I think it’s about the thought behind the design. When you intentionally design something, you stop and think about what elements you want to include. That gives you an opportunity to think about diverse learners and the elements of a good educational experience” (ID3).

Participants emphasized that consistency did not eliminate instructor choice. Rather, it was described as helping instructors prioritize foundational elements of a course while allowing flexibility in developing content and activities. The same instructional designer explained, “if you know the main pillars, you can do those first and not get distracted by ‘nice-to-haves.’ Your course is solid while you gradually enhance it. That benefits all students, including international students” (ID3). This perspective was also reflected by another instructional designer (ID2), reinforcing the role of structured course design in supporting intentional decision making and a focus on key elements of student learning.

Rather than describing consistency as limiting instructional autonomy, participants distinguished between shared expectations for elements such as navigation and weekly layout and flexibility in instructional approach. One curriculum consultant noted that while some standardization was necessary, it did not infringe on academic freedom, stating, “there should be choice. But there is stuff we can do that is not impinging on academic freedom. The college needs to say we are doing this one way” (CC3).

A standardized course structure was described as providing a stable foundation that supports both instructors and students. A faculty member explained that “having that predictable space where everything is located is important... how the teacher then decides to design and develop the remaining content is really up to them” (F3). Similarly, once students become familiar with

how a course is organized, they are better able to anticipate expectations. A curriculum consultant stated that “once students become familiar with how the course is laid out, they know there will be a weekly overview, learning materials, activities, and assessments” (CC1). Most participants suggested that this familiarity may be important for international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations in blended and online learning environments.

Across participant roles, consistency was described as a shared starting point rather than a rigid set of rules. Structure reduced uncertainty and repetition, making it easier for instructors to focus on teaching, student engagement, and responding to different learner needs. Participants described consistency as supporting pedagogical flexibility and inclusive teaching rather than restricting it.

4.3.4 Quality Matters and Consistent Course Design Supporting International Students

Familiarity with Quality Matters (QM) varied among participants. Those who had engaged directly with the framework described it as supporting consistency rather than prescribing specific teaching practices. Others indicated general awareness of QM but limited or no direct use. Quality Matters was most often framed as a way to clarify shared expectations related to course structure, navigation, and communication in blended and online learning environments. Clear course organization and predictable navigation consistent with QM principles were described as particularly helpful for international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and learning environments. As one curriculum consultant explained, if courses followed “the broad strokes of Quality Matters, instructor presence would be clear, communication would be clear, expectations would be laid out at the start, and navigation would be consistent across courses” (CC3).

When these principles were embedded into templates or course blueprints, they were described as helping establish a common starting point for quality across courses and programs. Instructional designers described translating the standards into practical tools that faculty could use during course development. One instructional designer described rebuilding a template so that it was “designed with Quality Matters in mind,” noting that the template was intended to “check off as many of those boxes as possible before faculty even start developing their content” (ID2). Similarly, another instructional designer described creating a blueprint immediately after completing QM training, explaining, “I added a checklist that follows the QM standards, so faculty can see them built right into the blueprint” (ID1).

Several participants suggested that applying the full set of standards at once was challenging. Rather than implementing the framework in its entirety, participants described selective or hybrid approaches that utilized key elements related to structure, clarity, and consistency. As one faculty member noted, “the consistency helps. Having a similar format reduces some of the stress and tension. That predictability benefits international students” (F1). Other participants felt that a standardized framework like QM could be beneficial for supporting part-time faculty, who have limited access to training or institutional guidance, with one participant stating that “a standardized framework like QM would help create consistency, especially for part-time faculty” (CC2). These perspectives were shared across participant roles. Faculty most often discussed QM in relation to student experience and teaching practice, while instructional designers and curriculum consultants emphasized its role in supporting quality, accessibility, and continuity across courses and programs.

4.4 Theme 2: Gaps Between Instructional Expectations and Institutional Supports

This theme highlights a disconnect between expectations for inclusive, quality teaching and the institutional resources, time, and structures available to support that work. Through the interviews, participants distinguished between *instructional supports* and *institutional supports*. Instructional supports referred to the practical resources that enable quality teaching, such as templates, blueprints, access to instructional designers, and guidance related to accessibility and inclusive design. Institutional supports referred to the structural conditions that make this work possible, including onboarding processes, workload allocation, paid professional development time, hiring timelines, and coordinated leadership. While participants could often point to pockets of instructional support, they consistently described gaps at the institutional level. In practice, this meant that tools and frameworks existed, but without the time, coordination, and institutional supports required to use them effectively. As one faculty member noted, “the college has not invested in teaching-and-learning support for years” (F3). Across roles, academic staff described strong personal commitments to quality and inclusion, alongside experiences of limited, uneven, or inconsistent institutional supports to carry out this work in practice.

4.4.1 Expectations for Inclusive and Quality Teaching for International Students

Participants described clear expectations for inclusive, quality teaching in blended and online learning environments. Rather than being driven by institutional directives, these expectations were most often framed as personal and professional commitments related to accessibility, engagement, and responsiveness to international students. These commitments were expressed consistently across roles, indicating a shared understanding of what effective and inclusive teaching should entail, even in the absence of consistent institutional support.

Faculty often spoke about quality in relational terms, particularly when discussing how international students adapt to unfamiliar learning environments. One faculty member described

the core purpose of teaching as “watching students blossom and go from A to B,” emphasizing that this depends on “facilitate[ing] a learning environment that makes it easier for them” (F2). Similarly, one curriculum consultant framed inclusive practice as a professional obligation, stating that “inclusive practice should be part of onboarding for all faculty” (CC2). Participants expressed frustration with how these expectations were met at the institutional level. As one curriculum consultant noted, “it seems like a no-brainer...navigation and clear expectations benefit everyone, and we are not great at implementing it” (CC2). One part-time faculty member captured this tension bluntly. “Quality should be non-negotiable. They preach inclusion, but they don’t understand it” (PTF1).

Instructional quality was understood as extending beyond content delivery to include accessibility, engagement, and responsiveness to learner needs. Inclusive teaching was not framed as optional or peripheral, but as work academic staff felt personally responsible for within their professional roles. Participants expressed frustration around the gap between these commitments and the clarity, consistency, or follow-through of institutional expectations. This tension provides the context for the subthemes that follow, which highlight how gaps in institutional supports shape training, practice, and the implementation of frameworks such as QM.

4.4.2 Inconsistent Training and Onboarding to Teach International Students

Despite strong personal and professional commitments to inclusive, quality teaching, participants described persistent gaps in training, onboarding, and institutional follow-through. These gaps were evident across roles and were particularly pronounced for part-time and contract faculty. Participants suggested that limited preparation for teaching in blended and online learning environments made it more difficult to support international students, who may

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require clearer communication of expectations, structured course design, and additional guidance when navigating unfamiliar academic learning environments. Late hiring timelines, and professional development opportunities that were difficult to access or poorly aligned with day-to-day teaching realities were recurring concerns.

Instructional designers frequently described the absence of systematic preparation for faculty. One instructional designer explained that “one of the biggest issues is training. When faculty are hired, they’re not informed about what courses should look like... We do have standards, but they’re not trained on them” (ID1) The same participant noted that “new faculty are often hired right before the term starts and told their courses are ‘ready to go.’ That’s never really the case. From this perspective, expectations for quality existed, but the conditions required to meet them were not in place” (ID1).

Faculty accounts echoed these concerns. One participant reflected that although professional development is formally acknowledged, “I know we’re supposed to have time for professional development in our Standard Workload Forms (SWFs), but it’s not a realistic thing that happens for us” (F2). Another faculty described the unevenness of institutional support, observing that “there is a significant difference from school to school around support and training for part-time people” (F1). For part-time faculty, these gaps were experienced most acutely. One participant explained that “almost all development is on my own time... There is no paid orientation and inconsistent expectation” (PTF1). This concern was reinforced by another participant, who noted that “many part-time faculty are thrown into fully international cohorts without training or support” (F3).

Curriculum consultants similarly described onboarding as minimal and delayed. One noted that by the time faculty were expected to teach, “by week three, they may have had one email

and perhaps a three-hour orientation. Then they are dropped into a course” (CC3). Across all participant roles, training and onboarding were described as fragmented and uneven, even where expectations for instructional quality existed. Professional development was often experienced as optional, self-directed, or dependent on individual initiative rather than being built into workload or institutional processes. As a result, participants described variability in teaching practices and an increased burden on academic staff to compensate for gaps in preparation and support. This pattern reinforced the broader disconnect between expectations for inclusive, quality teaching and the institutional structures available to sustain it.

4.4.3 Individual Workarounds and Informal Practices

In the absence of consistent institutional support, individual workarounds and informal practices were commonly relied upon to meet expectations for quality and inclusion for international students in blended and online learning environments. Rather than resisting inclusive or quality-focused approaches, academic staff described compensating through personal experience, self-directed learning, and ad hoc strategies. These efforts reflected strong professional commitment, but they were also described as uneven, invisible, and largely unsupported.

For some, this meant prioritizing accessibility and inclusion over formal professional development. One faculty member explained, “That is part of why I do not have time for formal PD on Quality Matters or international students. I am spending so much time above and beyond what I am supposed to, trying to make courses accessible for different types of learners” (F2). The same participant reflected that this learning was largely self-generated, noting, “it sounds like I have figured some of this out on my own... Other people have not, and I can see how that is an issue” (F2).

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Others described drawing on their own learning experiences to inform their practice. One faculty member shared that “my own online learning has really helped me develop empathy and reflection about what a student needs,” (F1) including students adapting to new academic expectations. Instructional designers similarly described pursuing professional learning independently. As one explained, “I’ve done a lot of webinars on my own time... mostly focused on inclusivity and quality learning” (ID3). One instructional designer noted that while institutional supports were limited, “I don’t know that the college regularly does things that help me do my work, but they’ve been supportive of things I’ve sought out” (ID2).

This pattern was especially pronounced for part-time faculty, who described carrying responsibility for inclusion largely on their own. One participant drew explicitly on their own immigrant background to support international students, designing multimodal materials and adapting explanations to bridge language and cultural gaps. Yet, this work was experienced as individualized rather than institutionally supported. As one part-time faculty stated “I feel like it is on me to support them. There’s no real help” (PTF1). For this participant, inclusion was not a technical problem but a relational one.

These informal approaches were described as common but difficult to sustain over time. Responsibility for inclusive and quality-focused teaching was frequently carried by individuals rather than supported through coordinated institutional processes. Institutional silos were also identified as contributing to this pattern, particularly where responsibilities related to course design, faculty development, accessibility, and student support were distributed across units with limited coordination. As a result, instructional quality and inclusive practice varied across courses and programs, even when shared values and sustained effort were evident.

4.4.4 Quality Matters as a Shared Language without Coordinated Institutional Supports

Quality Matters (QM) was frequently referred to as a useful framework for articulating expectations related to course design, clarity, and consistency. However, engagement with QM was described as uneven and closely tied to employment status, timing, and access to professional development. While some participants were able to draw on QM training or related resources, others, particularly part-time faculty, described structural barriers, including limited access to professional development, lack of paid time for course development, and inconsistent onboarding – that limited their ability to engage with the framework in consistent and meaningful ways.

For part-time faculty, QM was often experienced as something that existed in principle but not in practice. One part-time faculty member shared that “almost all development is on my own time... Over time, I realized the workload becomes like a full-time job. It’s precarious: no guarantees, no paid orientation, inconsistent expectations” (PTF1). Another participant captured this inequity more bluntly, stating that “part-time faculty might be told, ‘We offer stuff,’ but they have to go on their own time” (ID3). For those already compensating for limited support, QM training was experienced as one more expectation layered onto an already overloaded role. As one faculty member emphasized, “that is part of why I do not have time for formal PD on Quality Matters... I’m already spending so much time trying to make courses accessible”, (F2) including for international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and learning environments.

As a result, Quality Matters was often described as functioning more as a shared reference point for what quality *should* look like rather than as a consistently supported institutional practice. Those who had access to QM training described translating its principles into concrete

tools for others. One instructional designer reflected that “as soon as I finished Quality Matters, I built a blueprint... but not everyone has that training” (ID1). Similarly, one faculty member emphasized that “the training for Quality Matters is one of those resources that really helps to make sure that faculty are implementing those aspects” (F1). These efforts were often dependent on individual initiative rather than embedded within institutional structures.

Several participants highlighted the need for more coordinated, institution-wide approaches to course design. As one curriculum consultant stated, “a single college-wide template would solve half of this. It’s not an academic freedom issue, it’s structure” (CC3). This perspective was reinforced by other participants, who emphasized the need for coordinated institutional approaches to course design, despite shared recognition of its importance.

Several participants mentioned that the impact of QM depended heavily on local leadership and individual champions. One faculty member explained that when a school or department had leaders who valued quality and invested in teaching and learning, frameworks such as QM could shape practice across an entire unit. However, this influence was described as fragile. As this faculty member explained, when those individuals retired or moved on “so does that knowledge leaving no standards or use of QM” (F3) in their absence. In this way, quality practices were sustained through relationships and personal leadership rather than institutional structures. This participant further notes that investment in quality was often uneven across the institution and shaped by priorities and resources at the school or program level. As one curriculum consultant noted, “I don’t think things were college wide. For international student success, it depended on what program or school you were in” (CC2). Schools with large numbers of international students were described as having greater incentives and capacity to invest in frameworks such as QM, while others did not. As a result, practices related to course quality and consistency

varied by school, reinforcing institutional silos rather than establishing shared expectations across the college.

Without protected time, compensation, and coordinated institutional follow-through, engagement with QM remained uneven. Responsibility for translating quality standards into teaching and course design that support international students in blended and online learning environments was frequently described as falling to individuals, reinforcing the broader disconnect between expectations for instructional quality and the institutional support available to meet them. In practice, this meant that access to QM-informed course design depended less on shared policy or process and more on who happened to have training, time or informal influence. As a result, QM functioned unevenly across programs and academic roles, with its benefits concentrated where individual capacity already existed rather than distributed through systematic institutional support.

These findings highlight how institutional conditions shape the implementation of instructional quality in blended and online learning environments, particularly in relation to supporting international students. Across participant roles, faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants described similar expectations for inclusive quality teachings, alongside shared frustration with uneven training, onboarding, and institutional follow-through. These conditions were described as making it difficult to sustain inclusive practices that support international students in blended and online learning environments. The following theme examines how workload pressures, precarity, and institutional constraints shape the sustainability of inclusive practices.

4.5 Theme 3: Sustaining Quality Under Pressure and Precarity

This theme explores the conditions that shape whether instructional quality and inclusive practice can be sustained over time in blended and online learning environments. Increasing workload pressures, precarious employment, and competing institutional priorities were described as limiting the time and support available for this work. While a strong commitment to students and teaching was evident across academic staff, these conditions made it difficult to sustain inclusive and quality practices in ongoing and systematic ways. Across interviews, participants consistently linked these challenges to broader institutional conditions that shaped how course design and instructional practices were organized and supported, influencing academic staff's capacity to sustain inclusive practices for international students in blended and online learning environments.

4.5.1 Workload, Time, and Competing Priorities

Workload and time pressure were identified as central challenges to sustaining instructional quality in blended and online learning environments serving international students. Expectations related to accessibility, inclusive design, assessment alignment, and emerging technologies were frequently added to existing responsibilities without adjustments to workload, timelines, or staffing. As one curriculum consultant described, “we are often given 10 hours to teach someone new to course development everything they need to know, that includes answering their questions” (CC1). In this context, efforts to maintain instructional quality were described as competing with other institutional priorities rather than being protected or embedded within routine teaching and course development processes.

Participants emphasized that quality-related work now encompasses multiple, overlapping demands as the same curriculum consultant noted “some people see Accessibility for Ontarians

with Disabilities Act (AODA) compliance as part of quality, and it is, but you might also have to learn about AI and new technologies. They compete for faculty time and attention” (CC1).

Compliance with AODA focuses primarily on accessibility while frameworks such as Quality Matters (QM) address broader aspects of course design and instructional quality. Faculty similarly highlighted the cumulative nature of this work, with one participant observing that “it takes extra time, especially if your course is already developed and you have to switch it over” (F1).

Time pressure was described as built into academic work rather than as something that could be resolved through individual time management. Work related to instructional quality and inclusive teaching was often pushed to the margins, despite a strong commitment to doing this work well. These accounts suggest that inclusive design practices, including those intended to support international students in blended and online learning environments, depended not only on individual commitment but also on institutional conditions that shaped how academic work was organized.

4.5.2 Precarious Employment and Turnover

Precarious employment conditions and ongoing staffing turnover among part-time and contract faculty were described as significant challenges to sustaining instructional quality in blended and online learning environments serving international students. Part-time and contract faculty were often hired close to the start of the term, received limited onboarding, and were expected to engage in course development and professional learning without consistent compensation or continuity. Although only one participant in this study was employed as a part-time faculty member, reliance on part-time and contract teaching staff was a recurring point of

discussion across roles, reflecting broader institutional conditions rather than individual circumstances.

For those in precarious roles, professional learning and course development were frequently experienced as unpaid and uncertain. A part-time faculty participant explained, “almost all development is on my own time... Over time I realized the workload becomes like a full-time job. It’s precarious” (PTF1). The instability was described as having cumulative effects on instructional quality. A curriculum consultant described the cycle of turnover, noting, “People teach once and leave. Then you replace them every semester. We never get past the rookie year” (CC3).

Late hiring timelines further compounded these challenges. As the same consultant observed, “especially part-time professors... sometimes they are hired too late to attend training at all” (CC3). Entering a course with little preparation time, limited institutional guidance, and no formal onboarding positioned some instructors to teach courses with international students while simultaneously navigating unfamiliar institutional expectations and course structures themselves. Support was also described as uneven across the institution, with one faculty member stating that, “there is a significant difference from school to school around support and training for part-time people” (F1). Together, these conditions created highly variable starting points for instructors and reinforced a pattern in which instructional quality depended less on institutional systems and more on individual capacity, experience, and circumstance.

High turnover made it difficult to maintain consistency in course design and teaching practice. Rather than building on prior work, efforts to maintain course quality were often restarted as new instructors were brought in with limited preparation or support. In this context,

keeping shared standards or sustaining quality initiatives over time was described as difficult without more stable staffing and meaningful onboarding.

These accounts suggest that sustaining instructional quality in blended and online learning environments serving international students depends not only on individual commitment, but also on the institutional conditions that shape how academic work is organized and supported. Workload pressures, staffing instability, and uneven access to professional development were described as limiting the capacity of academic staff to sustain inclusive and consistent teaching practices over time.

4.5.3 Emotional and Relational Labour of Inclusive Practice

Participants also described the emotional and relational work involved in supporting students, particularly international students navigating unfamiliar academic, cultural, and personal contexts. Inclusive teaching was not described only in terms of course design or instructional strategies, but as ongoing relational work that requires time, attentiveness, and responsiveness to individual student needs. Several participants emphasized that effective teaching involves knowing who students are and being attuned to what they bring into the learning space. As one instructional designer reflected, “Part of being a good teacher is being aware of who is in front of you and being curious about your students” (ID3).

This relational dimension was especially evident in accounts of supporting international students. One participant highlighted the importance of time and presence, noting that “virtual office hours were essential... that one-on-one time helped them feel heard and valued” (CC2). A curriculum consultant described hearing international students say that “they are not given time to process... English is not their first language” (CC1).

For the part-time faculty member in particular, this work was shaped by personal experience as an immigrant to Canada. Drawing on their own experiences of navigating language and cultural differences, the participant described adapting explanations, designing multimodal materials, and spending additional time ensuring students felt understood. This form of inclusion was described as deeply relational, rooted in empathy and lived experience rather than formal training or institutional guidance.

While relational approaches to inclusion were described positively, this work was rarely reflected in formal workload expectations or institutional resources. Under conditions of ongoing workload pressure and staffing instability, the emotional demands of inclusive teaching were often experienced as contributing to fatigue and making these practices more difficult to sustain over time. These pressures were particularly evident in blended and online learning environments serving international students, who may require additional time, communication, and individualized support.

4.5.4 Limits of Frameworks Without Institutional Commitment

Frameworks such as Quality Matters were described as providing useful guidance and a shared language for instructional quality but were not viewed as sufficient on their own to address the institutional conditions shaping sustainability in blended and online environments serving international students. Without institutional commitment in the form of protected time, including workload allocations through mechanisms such as the Standard Workload Form (SWF), staffing stability, and coordinated support, quality frameworks were often experienced as aspirational rather than fully actionable in practice.

Participants suggested that frameworks such as QM were only useful when supported by institutional conditions that enabled staff to engage with them in practice. As one curriculum

consultant observed, “even if the results of your research were implemented, actually getting people into the seats will be the issue.” An instructional designer emphasized that while the principles of good design were widely accepted, “there’s really no excuse not to aim for good design... but it does take time” (ID3). Another participant noted that “a standardized framework like QM would help create consistency, but only if it’s supported” (CC2).

Without institutional support aligned with available resources and working conditions, teaching and course design initiatives were described as difficult to sustain over time in programs enrolling international students. Concerns related to workload pressure, precarity, and sustainability were raised not only by part-time faculty, but also by full-time faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants. This pattern suggests that these challenges were experienced across academic staff rather than being confined to any single role or employment category, reinforcing the institutional nature of the conditions shaping instructional quality.

4.6 Cross-Theme Summary

The three themes illustrate that instructional quality and inclusive practice in blended and online learning environments serving international students are widely valued yet unevenly supported at the institutional level. Across the interviews, a shared understanding of effective teaching was described as including clear structure, inclusive design, accessibility, and responsiveness to international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and learning environments. At the same time, sustaining these practices was understood to depend less on individual commitment and more on institutional supports available to support teaching and course design.

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Consistency and structure were understood as foundational conditions supporting both student success and inclusive teaching practices. Predictable course organization, standardized layouts, and clear navigation were described as reducing unnecessary cognitive effort and allowing students to focus more fully on learning. Structural support was not framed as restrictive; it was understood as enabling pedagogical flexibility and intentional teaching.

The findings also point to the effects of institutional silos on instructional quality and international student support. Responsibilities related to course design, faculty development, accessibility, and international student support were distributed across multiple units with limited coordination. As one curriculum consultant noted, “Supports weren’t consistent across programs. Success depended on the program or school. International student support needs to be college-wide.” This lack of coordination contributed to fragmented practices, inconsistent support, and unclear accountability. In practice, quality and inclusion were experienced as program-dependent rather than embedded as shared institutional commitments.

Participants described a disconnect between expectations for inclusive teaching and the institutional supports available. While strong commitments to quality and inclusion were consistently expressed, training, onboarding, and professional development were described as inconsistent or insufficient. Although international students were frequently referenced in discussions of inclusive practice, participants described limited coordinated institutional supports specifically focused on international students in teaching and course design. As a result, responsibility for maintaining instructional quality frequently shifted to individuals, leading to

reliance on informal workarounds and self-directed efforts rather than coordinated institutional approaches.

Overall, these findings suggest that challenges related to instructional quality and inclusion are not the result of limited awareness, values, or willingness among academic staff. Instead, they point to the central role of institutional supports in shaping teaching and course design practices. Although the themes are presented separately for clarity, participants across roles described similar experiences shaped by common institutional conditions. Together, the findings suggest that instructional quality and inclusive practice in blended and online learning environments supporting international students are shaped by institutional coordination and available supports. A thematic summary across roles is provided in Appendix F to illustrate how these themes are experienced across academic staff roles. The implications of these findings are explored in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Building on the findings presented in Chapter 4, this chapter interprets those results in relation to broader scholarship on instructional quality, inclusive pedagogy, and academic staff supporting international students in blended and online learning environments. Drawing on the three themes that were developed from the data analysis - (1) Consistency and Structure Supporting International Student Success, (2) Gaps Between Instructional Expectations and Institutional Support, and (3) Sustaining Quality Under Pressure and Precarity - this discussion interprets what these patterns reveal about how instructional quality and inclusion are understood within the context of “Blue Jay College”.

Rather than treating these themes as isolated findings, this discussion considers them expressions of deeper structural and institutional conditions shaping course design and teaching practice for international students. Integrating participant accounts with existing research, the chapter explores how expectations for inclusive, high-quality learning for international students are translated into practice by academic staff in contexts where institutional guidance exists but implementation remains inconsistent across programs and courses. It also considers how frameworks such as Quality Matters (QM) function within these conditions. In doing so, the chapter provides an interpretive analysis of how quality is sustained, challenged, and negotiated in practice, and outlines implications of these findings for professional development, institutional policy, and the design of blended learning environments supporting international students in Canadian college contexts.

Theme 1 Discussion: Consistency and Structure Supporting International Student Success

This theme highlights how consistent course structure and clear navigational design function as inclusive practices that reduce barriers for international students who may be adapting to unfamiliar academic expectations and learning environments. The findings suggest that course

consistency and predictable structure play a central role in supporting student success within blended and online learning environments. Participants in this study described how standardized layouts, shared templates, and clear navigation reduce confusion and allow students to focus on learning rather than on locating course materials or interpreting course expectations. Within this study, course design refers to structural elements such as course organization, predictable navigation, alignment between learning activities and assessments, and clear communication of expectations within the learning management system. From the perspective of academic staff across roles, instructional quality is closely connected to how students experience course organization and navigation.

Participants in this study described how clear course organization, alignment, and predictable navigation helped international students focus on learning tasks rather than spending time locating course materials or clarifying assignment expectations. The findings suggest that course consistency functions not only as an organizational feature but also as an inclusion strategy that reduces structural barriers for students navigating unfamiliar learning environments. This interpretation is consistent with research showing that clear course organization and navigation support student success in blended and online learning environments, particularly when students are still developing familiarity with these learning formats (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Hrastinski, 2019). Studies of international students in blended and online learning environments highlight the importance of clear expectations and structured course design when learners are adapting to unfamiliar academic systems and technological platforms (Mittelmeier & Jung, 2022; Dennen et al., 2024). A recent study identifies clear organization, alignment, and navigational efficiency as key dimensions supporting student learning in blended and online learning environments (Al Abri & Elhaj, 2025). This reflects research showing that course organization

and teaching presence influence international student engagement and perceptions of deep learning in blended and online learning environments (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Shen et al., 2025). In poorly structured courses, learners expend cognitive effort navigating materials and clarifying expectations rather than engaging with course content. Participants described how unclear organization shifts students' attention from learning activities toward navigation tasks, echoing broader research exploring links between course structure and learner success in digital environments (Heilporn et al., 2021; Raes, 2022).

Consistency and structure are closely connected to blended and online learning and inclusive course design. Blended environments require students to navigate multiple instructional spaces, including in-person and online components, and participants described how predictable organization reduces uncertainty across these transitions. A recent literature review notes that predictable organization reduces learning barriers by allowing students to focus on course content rather than platform navigation (Lomellini et al., 2025). Participants also perceived consistent course layouts as a practical way to support international students adapting to new educational systems, language demands, and technological platforms. This observation resonates with research suggesting that inclusive pedagogical strategies benefit from predictable learning environments that reduce unnecessary barriers for international students adjusting to unfamiliar academic and cultural contexts (Mittelmeier & Jung, 2022).

Participants did not describe consistency as limiting instructional autonomy. Instead, shared course structures were framed as supporting flexible teaching practice. Consistent navigation and organization provided a foundation that allowed instructors to focus on pedagogy and student engagement rather than repeatedly addressing navigation-related questions. Research on blended learning implementation similarly reports that consistent course organization supports both

instructor effectiveness and student engagement across delivery modes (Mohammadi et al., 2025). These findings challenge assumptions that standardization conflicts with academic freedom, consistent with scholarship showing that structured course frameworks can enhance teaching practice by allowing instructors to concentrate on pedagogy and learner engagement rather than administrative clarification. Within the “Blue Jay College” this suggests that structural consistency may enable rather than constrain instructional flexibility. For academic staff designing and teaching courses for international students, predictable course organization may allow instructors to focus more fully on clarifying expectations, supporting language development, and responding to diverse learning needs rather than addressing navigation-related challenges.

Within this emphasis on structural consistency, participants frequently connected course organization practices to the QM framework, describing it as one mechanism through which consistency could be achieved. Those familiar with QM noted that it provided a common language and reference point for course design expectations, although implementation was often partial or adapted. In practice, participants tended to adopt elements related to clarity, communication, and navigation rather than applying the framework in its entirety. Quality Matters, therefore, appears to function less as a strict quality checklist and more as a professional development and design support tool within institutional contexts. Previous studies similarly report that course clarity, alignment, and transparent communication contribute positively to student satisfaction and course effectiveness in online and blended learning contexts, particularly when shared quality processes are in place to support consistent student learning experiences (de la Mora Velasco et al., 2025; Lowenthal & Hodges, 2015; Westine et al., 2019). These findings are further supported by research on transnational distance education students, which highlights

the importance of accessibility, learner-centred design, and supportive learning environments as key dimensions of perceived quality (Heiser et al., 2024). These findings also align with research on international students in blended and online learning environments, suggesting that clear course organization, communication, and predictable learning environments can help reduce uncertainty and barriers for students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and learning systems (Mittelmeier & Jung, 2022).

The analysis revealed how understandings of instructional quality differ across roles. Faculty participants in this study tended to frame consistency in terms of classroom efficiency and student experience, while instructional designers and curriculum consultants positioned consistency as an institutional responsibility connected to program coherence and quality assurance. This variation suggests that instructional quality is interpreted differently across academic roles and levels of authority, reinforcing the importance of understanding course quality as both a pedagogical and organizational issue (McGregor et al., 2022). For international students navigating unfamiliar academic systems and course expectations in blended and online learning environments, inconsistencies in how course quality is interpreted and implemented across roles may result in uneven learning experiences across courses and programs.

These findings indicate that consistency and structure are not simply matters of course organization but conditions that support inclusive learning environments by reducing structural learning barriers for international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations. When course expectations and navigation are clear, students can direct cognitive effort toward learning activities rather than procedural uncertainty. Structural consistency is understood not only as course organization, but as an inclusive practice that reduces learning barriers without requiring

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individual accommodations that some students, both international and domestic, may not know how to access or may hesitate to request.

Theme 1 addresses Research Question 3, which explores how academic staff perceive the role of the Quality Matters framework in supporting course design and professional development. Participants describe consistency and structure as practical mechanisms supporting inclusive blended learning for international students, with QM frequently referenced as a framework supporting these outcomes. The theme also informs Research Question 1 by showing how course design practices function as part of the institutional supports available to staff and students. These findings suggest that academic staff perceptions of instructional quality are shaped not only by individual teaching decisions but also by shared design practices that reduce unnecessary learning barriers for international students navigating unfamiliar academic environments.

Theme 2 Discussion: Gaps Between Instructional Expectations and Institutional Support

Findings related to Theme 2 reveal a persistent disconnect between expectations for inclusive, high-quality teaching and the institutional structures available to support that work. Participants across roles described strong professional commitments to accessibility, engagement, and responsiveness to international students. However, these expectations were not consistently matched by institutional conditions such as coordinated onboarding, workload allocation, or protected time for course development and professional learning. Instructional quality, therefore, often depended less on institutional systems and more on individual initiative and professional commitment. This is consistent with research indicating that internationalization initiatives frequently increase expectations for inclusive teaching without corresponding

institutional investment in academic staff support and development (Ma, 2022; McGregor et al., 2022).

Participants distinguished between instructional supports and institutional supports when describing the conditions that influence instructional quality. Instructional supports such as course templates, access to instructional designers, and guidance related to accessibility and course organization were often available in localized or program-specific contexts. Institutional supports such as structured onboarding, coordinated leadership, and sustained professional development were described as uneven or fragmented. As a result, tools and frameworks intended to support course quality and inclusive teaching, such as Quality Matters, frequently existed, yet academic staff lacked the time, coordination, and institutional follow-through needed to use them consistently to support international students. Similar patterns appear in research on blended and online learning environments, where instructional resources may exist, but institutional coordination and sustained support remain uneven across programs and units (Legusov et al., 2023).

Training and onboarding were identified as areas where this disconnect was most visible. Participants described faculty, especially those hired shortly before the start of term, as frequently entering courses with limited preparation and minimal orientation to institutional expectations. While expectations for quality and inclusion were widely understood, the preparation necessary to meet these expectations was often absent. Participants also noted that course preparation and professional development were not always formally recognized within institutional workload structures, leaving instructors with limited time to engage in course development or training. These findings are consistent with broader research showing that academic staff development is frequently treated as optional or individualized rather than

embedded within institutional workload structures. Prior research similarly demonstrates that professional development related to inclusive and digital pedagogy often depends on individual initiative rather than institutional expectation, limiting consistent implementation across courses and programs (Baldwin & Ching, 2021; McGregor et al., 2022; VanLeeuwen et al., 2020). In practice, responsibility for instructional quality often falls to individuals rather than being supported through institutional processes. Within the context of this study, participants also suggested that these institutional gaps may create additional challenges when teaching international students who are often navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and course formats in blended learning environments.

In response to institutional gaps in onboarding, professional development, and coordinated instructional support, participants described relying on individual workarounds and informal strategies. Academic staff frequently pursued professional learning independently, redesigned courses on their own time, and drew on personal experience to support international students navigating unfamiliar academic expectations in blended and online learning environments. These efforts reflect strong professional commitment but also reveal how inclusion and quality often depend on invisible labour. This finding resonates with literature documenting how faculty frequently compensate for institutional gaps through unpaid course redesign and self-directed professional learning, particularly in blended and online learning environments (Lowenthal & Lomellini, 2023). Research on internationalization in higher education similarly suggests that institutions often recruit international students without providing consistent pedagogical support or professional development for instructors teaching increasingly diverse classrooms, highlighting ongoing challenges in aligning internationalization strategies with course design and teaching practices (Leask, 2015; Mittelmeier & Yang, 2022). These patterns reflect similar

challenges, where the growth of international student enrolment is not always matched by coordinated pedagogical support for academic staff. While sometimes effective, such individualized approaches are difficult to sustain and result in variability across courses and programs. Inclusive teaching practices, therefore, become unevenly distributed, shaped by individual capacity rather than shared institutional structures. Research on college faculty working conditions similarly highlights how uneven institutional support contributes to inconsistent student learning experiences across programs and disciplines (Community College Research Centre, 2018; Usher, 2022).

Quality Matters functioned within this context as a shared language for instructional quality rather than as a consistently supported institutional practice. Participants who had access to QM training described using its principles to guide course design and support colleagues, yet engagement with the framework remained uneven and closely tied to employment status, timing, and access to professional development. Part-time faculty in particular described limited opportunity to engage with QM due to lack of compensation and preparation time. Consequently, the framework's influence often depended on local leadership and individual champions within programs rather than coordinated institutional implementation. Studies examining QM adoption report that implementation is strongest where institutional leadership actively supports faculty engagement, while reliance on local champions produces uneven integration across institutions (Gregory et al., 2020; Driscoll, 2023).

The findings suggest that expectations for inclusive, quality teaching are widely shared across academic roles but are not consistently supported through institutional systems. Responsibility for sustaining instructional quality frequently rested with individuals who compensate for structural gaps through personal effort. Research similarly shows that course quality outcomes

improve when institutions combine professional development, intentional course design, and internal review processes rather than relying solely on individual academic staff initiative (Zimmerman et al., 2020). This pattern raises important questions about how institutions distribute responsibility for inclusion and quality in supporting international students, particularly in contexts where reliance on contract faculty and decentralized program structures continues to increase.

The study findings are consistent with existing research on blended and online learning environments. However, the focus on international students in this study provides additional insight into how instructional quality is experienced and sustained within the Canadian college contexts, an understudied sector where research has focused largely on universities. Existing scholarship on international students often explores their experiences through cultural adjustment, belonging, or student support frameworks. The analysis suggests that structural elements of course design, such as consistent organization, clear navigation, and predictable course expectations, function as inclusive practices that reduce learning barriers for international students in blended and online learning environments. The sustainability of these practices is shaped not only by individual teaching approaches but also by institutional conditions, including professional development structures, workload allocation, and academic employment arrangements that influence how academic staff implement inclusive course design practices.

Theme 2 most directly addresses Research Questions 1 and 2 by highlighting how academic staff perceive institutional supports and the challenges encountered when those supports are uneven or absent in efforts to support inclusive teaching for international students in blended and online learning environments. The theme also indirectly informs Research Question 3 by

demonstrating how engagement with frameworks such as Quality Matters remains uneven when professional development and institutional infrastructure are inconsistent.

Theme 3 Discussion: Sustaining Quality Under Pressure and Precarity

Theme 3 highlights how the sustainability of instructional quality and inclusive practices supporting international students is shaped not only by pedagogical knowledge or professional commitment but also by broader working conditions within blended and online learning environments. Across participant roles, strong dedication to students and teaching was evident. However, participants described workload pressures, precarious employment conditions, and competing institutional priorities as making it difficult to sustain inclusive teaching practices. Instructional quality, therefore, depended not only on knowing what to do, but on having the conditions necessary to sustain these practices.

This interpretation aligns with scholarship demonstrating that institutional expectations for inclusive and digitally mediated teaching have expanded more rapidly than the structural supports available to academic staff, placing increasing responsibility on individual instructors to compensate for systemic gaps (Ma, 2022; McGregor et al., 2022). Time and workload pressures were repeatedly described as central constraints. Expectations related to accessibility, inclusive course design, assessment alignment, and the integration of emerging technologies have increased over time, yet participants reported that these expectations were rarely accompanied by adjustments to workload or staffing. Work related to instructional quality frequently competed with other demands rather than being embedded within routine course development processes. These pressures were described as structural rather than personal, meaning that sustaining quality could not be resolved through improved individual time management alone. As a result, work related to instructional quality was often treated as secondary to other teaching responsibilities,

despite strong professional commitment among academic staff to maintaining these practices. Under these conditions, efforts to support international students through inclusive course design, clear communication, and culturally responsive teaching practices were often constrained by limited time and competing responsibilities.

This pattern mirrors findings in blended learning research emphasizing that academic staff are increasingly expected to integrate accessibility, inclusive pedagogy, and educational technologies without corresponding institutional investment in workload adjustments or sustained professional development support (Martin et al., 2019; Baldwin & Ching, 2021). Precarious employment and high turnover among part-time and contract faculty further complicated efforts to maintain course quality and continuity. Participants across roles noted that part-time instructors were frequently hired shortly before the start of term, received limited onboarding, and were expected to begin teaching with minimal preparation or institutional guidance. Under these conditions, course development and professional learning often occurred without compensation or continuity. Turnover created cycles in which instructional practices were repeatedly restarted rather than built upon, making it difficult to sustain shared standards or long-term quality initiatives related to course design and inclusive teaching practices supporting international students. Instructional quality, therefore, often depended less on institutional systems than on the experience and capacity of whoever happened to be teaching at that time.

These findings are consistent with research documenting the growing reliance on part-time and contract faculty in Canadian colleges, where instructors are frequently expected to meet the same instructional standards as full-time colleagues despite reduced access to professional development and institutional supports (Community College Research Centre, 2018; Usher, 2022). Prior studies similarly demonstrate that precarious employment conditions limit

opportunities for sustained instructional development and continuity in teaching practice (Jin & Schieder, 2017; Willson et al., 2024). The present study extends the literature by illustrating how these employment conditions also influence the sustainability of inclusive teaching practices supporting international students in blended and online learning environments.

Participants emphasized that inclusive teaching involves emotional and relational labour in addition to technical course design work. Supporting students, particularly international students navigating unfamiliar academic and cultural contexts, required time, attentiveness, and responsiveness beyond formal instructional tasks. Inclusive teaching was frequently described as relational work involving listening, adapting explanations, and ensuring students feel understood and supported. While participants viewed this relational dimension as central to effective teaching, it was rarely reflected in formal workload expectations. Under conditions of sustained workload pressure and staffing instability, this emotional labour contributed to fatigue and made inclusive practices more difficult to sustain over time. Recent research similarly suggests that precarious employment conditions place emotional and professional burdens on educators, which may affect their capacity to sustain teaching quality and student support over time (McKendrick-Calder et al., 2025).

This relational dimension echoes literature emphasizing that inclusive pedagogical approaches extend beyond course design to include social and academic integration supports that help international students navigate unfamiliar educational environments (Mittelmeier & Jung, 2022; Bianchi & Martini, 2023). Institutional workload structures rarely recognized this labour, leaving academic staff to absorb these responsibilities individually. Within these constraints, quality frameworks provided useful guidance and a reference point for course quality but were not seen as sufficient on their own to address structural challenges. Participants highlighted that

such frameworks require sustained institutional commitment to function effectively. Without protected time for course development, stable staffing, and coordinated institutional support, these frameworks were often experienced as aspirational rather than fully actionable. As a result, responsibility for translating the standards into practice frequently fell to academic staff, reinforcing a broader pattern in which instructional quality relied more on personal effort than on coordinated institutional structures.

Research on QM implementation similarly demonstrates that while the framework provides effective guidance for course clarity and alignment, meaningful adoption depends on institutional investment in training, instructional design support, and sustained professional development rather than one-time implementation efforts (Driscoll, 2023; Zimmerman et al., 2020). The findings of this study suggest that sustaining instructional quality requires more than pedagogical expertise or access to quality frameworks. It also depends on institutional conditions that enable academic staff to maintain inclusive and quality-focused practices over time. When these conditions are absent, improvements in course quality become difficult to sustain, even where commitment and expertise are present. These pressures raise important questions about how institutions can better connect expectations for instructional quality with the resources and working conditions required to support it in practice.

Theme 3 further addresses Research Question 2 by exploring how workload pressures, precarious employment, and institutional constraints limit the sustainability of inclusive and quality-focused teaching practices. This theme also informs Research Question 3 by showing that while frameworks such as Quality Matters provide guidance, their effectiveness depends on institutional conditions that allow academic staff to implement and sustain quality practices to

support international students. These findings suggest that instructional quality is shaped not only by pedagogical knowledge but by broader institutional working conditions.

Cross-Theme Interpretation

Across all three themes, instructional quality and inclusive practices are understood not simply as outcomes of individual teaching decisions, but as practices shaped by institutional conditions within which academic staff work. Participants consistently valued clarity, accessibility, and responsiveness to international students. However, their ability to enact these values depended heavily on the availability of institutional supports, professional development opportunities, and working conditions that made quality-focused teaching sustainable over time.

The themes show that inclusive course design is not achieved through course templates or individual effort alone. Theme 1 illustrates how consistent course structures can reduce unnecessary cognitive and navigational barriers for students, particularly those adapting to new academic and cultural environments. Theme 2 demonstrates how expectations for inclusive teaching frequently exceed the institutional supports available to academic staff, resulting in reliance on individual workarounds rather than coordinated institutional strategies. Theme 3 further shows how workload pressures, employment precarity, and institutional instability make it difficult to sustain improvements in course quality over time, even where commitment and expertise are present.

This suggests that instructional quality in blended learning environments is continuously negotiated within the realities of institutional infrastructure, staffing models, and professional expectations. Frameworks such as Quality Matters function as a reference point for course quality, yet their impact remains uneven when academic staff lack the time, support, or stability needed to implement them. Improving instructional quality, therefore, requires attention not only

to pedagogy and course design but also to the institutional conditions that allow academic staff to sustain inclusive teaching over time.

Interpretation in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by a conceptual framework centred on four interconnected constructs: the Quality Matters (QM) framework, blended learning as the instructional context, inclusive course design as a guiding pedagogical principle, and the role of academic staff in supporting international students through course design. Analysis of the findings demonstrates that these constructs do not operate independently in practice. Rather, their implementation is shaped by institutional conditions that influence how course design decisions are applied and sustained over time.

First, the findings clarify how the QM framework functions within institutional practice. Rather than operating as a comprehensive quality assurance system applied across programs, QM was most often experienced as a shared reference point supporting course organization, clarity, and alignment. Academic staff familiar with QM described drawing selectively on aspects of the framework, specifically those related to navigation, communication, and alignment, while implementation remained uneven across roles and programs.

Second, participants described blended learning as the instructional environment within which challenges related to inclusion and course quality become visible. While blended delivery is intended to provide flexibility for students, participants described how movement between online and face-to-face components, as well as between courses organized differently across programs, often creates uncertainty when expectations and navigation vary. These inconsistencies affect not only students but also academic staff, particularly part-time or newly hired instructors who must quickly adapt to unfamiliar course structures with limited preparation.

Consistent navigation and communication practices therefore function as stabilizing elements, helping both students and instructors manage transitions between learning spaces. The findings suggest that flexibility in delivery alone does not automatically result in inclusive learning experiences. Instead, participants pointed to the importance of consistent course design and institutional coordination in helping both students and academic staff navigate differences across courses and programs more confidently.

Third, inclusive course design appeared less as a consistently embedded institutional practice and more as an outcome shaped by individual initiative and available supports. Participants expressed strong commitment to supporting diverse learners, including international students, yet sustaining inclusive practices depended heavily on access to professional development, manageable workload, instructional design assistance, and stable working conditions. Where institutional responsibilities for course design, accessibility, and teaching support remained distributed across units with limited coordination, inclusive practices often developed unevenly across programs. Inclusive design is therefore understood not only as a pedagogical principle but as a practice whose implementation varies depending on institutional conditions. Inclusion, in this context, is often realized through individual effort rather than coordinated institutional systems.

Finally, academic staff function as central mediators between institutional quality initiatives and student learning experiences. Faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants translate frameworks such as QM into practical course design decisions, yet their capacity to do so is shaped by workload pressures, employment conditions, and access to professional learning opportunities. The findings indicate that improving instructional quality requires attention not

only to course design frameworks but also to the institutional environments that enable staff to implement and sustain inclusive practices over time.

The interpretation of the findings through the conceptual framework highlights that instructional quality and inclusion in blended and online learning environments are understood as being shaped through the interaction of design frameworks, institutional supports, and academic staff capacity. While frameworks such as QM provide useful guidance, their influence remains contingent upon institutional systems that support sustained engagement with course development and inclusive teaching practices. In this way, the conceptual framework remains applicable, but the findings refine understanding of how these constructs operate within institutional realities.

Implications for Practice, Policy, and Professional Development

The findings of this study carry important implications for teaching practice, institutional policy, and professional development within the context of “Blue Jay College”. Across all three themes, instructional quality and inclusive practice were shown to depend not only on individual academic staff commitment, but also on institutional structures that shape how academic staff are supported in their work (VanLeeuwen et al., 2020). The following subsections outline implications related to instructional practices and course design, institutional policy and leadership, and professional development for academic staff.

Implications for Teaching and Course Design Practice

At the level of instructional practice, findings from Theme 1 related to course consistency and navigation suggest that consistent course organization and predictable navigation are not merely technical design preferences but function as inclusive practices that support international students. Faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants described how shared

templates and predictable course structures reduce unnecessary cognitive load and enable students, particularly international students, to focus on learning activities rather than locating course materials or navigating course expectations.

For academic staff, this suggests that course consistency should be understood as a foundation that supports pedagogical flexibility rather than limiting academic autonomy. When navigation, expectations, and communication structures are standardized, instructors can devote more attention to instructional innovation, student engagement, and responsive teaching. Practical implications include expanding the use of shared course templates, encouraging program-level agreement on core navigation elements, and embedding accessibility and clarity into course design from the outset rather than addressing them retroactively.

Implications for Institutional Policy and Leadership

The study also highlights important policy implications related to how institutions distribute responsibility for instructional quality and inclusion. Findings related to Theme 2, which identified gaps between instructional expectations and institutional supports, indicate that participants consistently described a disconnect between expectations for inclusive, high-quality teaching and the institutional conditions required to support this work. While tools and frameworks often existed, workload allocation, onboarding processes, and professional development structures did not consistently enable staff to use them effectively.

Institutional leaders therefore face important decisions regarding how expectations for course quality are aligned with staffing models, hiring timelines, and workload structures. Policies that position instructional quality as a shared institutional responsibility rather than relying primarily on individual effort may include earlier hiring timelines, structured onboarding processes, and protected time for course development. These policies may also involve greater preparation and

professional development support for contract and part-time faculty, as well as coordinated leadership across academic units. Without such alignment, quality initiatives risk being sustained through individual effort rather than coordinated institutional systems.

The findings also point to the need for greater institutional coordination across units responsible for teaching and learning support, accessibility, and student services. Fragmentation of responsibilities can result in uneven implementation of inclusive practices across programs, reinforcing variability in student experiences.

Implications for Professional Development

Professional development was identified as a critical but unevenly accessible support across roles. Findings related to Theme 3 indicate that, while many participants demonstrated strong commitment to improving their practice, professional learning was often self-directed and undertaken without protected time or compensation. This was particularly evident among part-time faculty, who frequently lacked access to structured professional development opportunities despite being expected to meet the same instructional expectations as full-time colleagues.

Implications for professional development include designing offerings that are accessible across employment categories and responsive to the realities of blended and online teaching contexts. Flexible delivery models, compensated participation, and opportunities for consultation with instructional designers may be more effective than relying solely on self-paced modules. Embedding professional development within workload expectations rather than treating it as optional may also support more consistent engagement.

The study also suggests that frameworks such as Quality Matters function most effectively when integrated into professional development and institutional processes rather than presented as optional design resources. Professional learning initiatives that connect QM standards with

practical course development tools and program-level practices may help translate quality principles into sustained practice.

Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to scholarship on instructional quality and inclusive blended and online learning environments for international students in several important ways. First, it foregrounds academic staff perspectives within the context of “Blue Jay College,” a Canadian college setting that remains under-researched relative to university-focused studies of instructional quality, course design, and international student support. While existing research has explored international student experiences, blended and online learning design, and course quality frameworks separately, less attention has been given to how academic staff perceive institutional supports when designing blended and online learning environments for international students within college contexts. By exploring how faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants perceive these supports, the study provides insight into how institutional structures shape course design practices in blended and online learning environments.

Second, the findings suggest that instructional quality is shaped not only by pedagogical knowledge or course design frameworks, but also by institutional working conditions, professional development structures, and employment stability. By identifying the challenges and barriers academic staff encounter when designing or delivering blended and online learning for international students, the study highlights how institutional conditions influence the sustainability of inclusive teaching practices. In doing so, the study demonstrates that inclusive course design supporting international students in blended and online learning environments is shaped not only by individual teaching approaches but also by the institutional supports available to academic staff.

Third, the study contributes to understanding how quality frameworks such as Quality Matters (QM) are perceived and used by academic staff in supporting inclusive course design and professional development in blended and online learning environments for international students. The findings suggest that academic staff often experience QM less as a formal evaluation tool and more as a shared framework that supports course organization, alignment, and navigational clarity. The findings also position course consistency and navigational clarity as inclusive practices that reduce structural learning barriers, particularly for international students adapting to new academic and cultural contexts. Together, these contributions extend existing research by illustrating how frameworks such as Quality Matters operate within and are shaped by institutional realities such as limited professional development opportunities for academic staff, workload constraints, and uneven instructional support structures.

Overall Implications

The findings indicate that improving instructional quality in blended and online learning environments requires attention not only to pedagogy and course design, but also to the institutional conditions that enable academic staff to sustain inclusive teaching practices over time. Frameworks such as Quality Matters offer valuable guidance, yet their effectiveness appears closely connected to institutional commitment to staff support, professional development, and sustainable working conditions. Within the context of “Blue Jay College,” course structure, staff preparation, and institutional coordination are understood as important factors supporting inclusive blended and online learning environments for international students. Research on international students in Canadian higher education similarly highlights the importance of clear expectations, communication, and coordinated institutional supports in helping students navigate unfamiliar academic and cultural environments (Torres-Arends et al.,

2025). Attention to these areas may help reduce reliance on individual workarounds and support more consistent learning experiences for international students across programs. The following chapter concludes the study by summarizing the findings and outlining final implications and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations

This chapter presents recommendations based on the findings, outlines the limitations of the study, identifies directions for future research, highlights the study's contributions, and concludes with a final reflection. My interpretation of the findings guides this chapter, with a focus on the implications for academic staff and the design of inclusive blended and online learning environments for international students.

It also explores how academic staff perceive the role of the Quality Matters (QM) framework in supporting structured and consistent course design, and how its use is shaped by the institutional conditions within which they work.

Summary of Findings (See Chapter 5 for detailed findings)

This study explored how academic staff perceive institutional supports, the challenges they encounter, and the role of the Quality Matters (QM) framework in supporting international students in blended and online learning environments. The findings provide insight into how instructional quality is experienced within the institutional context.

Research Question 1: How do academic staff perceive the institutional supports available for designing blended learning experiences for international students?

The findings suggest that institutional supports for academic staff at Blue Jay College are inconsistent across programs. While some participants reported access to instructional design support and professional development, others described limited or inconsistent access. As a

result, course design practices were often shaped by individual initiative rather than coordinated institutional approaches.

Research Question 2: What challenges and barriers do academic staff encounter in designing and delivering blended learning for international students?

Participants identified several interconnected challenges, including limited time for course development, restricted access to professional development, and precarious employment conditions. These conditions affected their ability to design structured and consistent learning environments and often required them to rely on informal strategies to support students.

Research Question 3: How do academic staff perceive the role of the QM framework in supporting inclusive course design and professional development?

Participants viewed QM as a useful guide for course design, particularly in relation to structure, alignment, and clarity. However, its use was not consistent across the institution and is often dependent on access to training, professional development, and institutional support. As a result, QM functions more as a reference point for course design rather than a consistently implemented framework.

In my interpretation, a consistent pattern is evident: instructional quality is not only shaped by individual course practices, but also by institutional conditions. These include inconsistent access to professional development, variability in instructional design support, workload constraints, reliance on part-time faculty, and differences in program-level leadership and resource allocation. These conditions influence how consistently course design practices are applied across the college and how frameworks such as QM are used. As a result, instructional quality was not experienced as a coordinated institutional approach but instead varies across

programs depending on the supports available to academic staff. The findings provide a foundation for understanding how instructional quality is closely tied to the institutional context.

Key Insights

What becomes evident is that instructional quality is not determined by course design alone but is shaped by the institutional conditions within which academic staff work, including access to professional development, instructional design support, and time for course development. Within this context, the QM framework was experienced as a useful guide for course design, particularly in relation to structure and alignment; however, its use was uneven and often dependent on individual initiative rather than coordinated approaches across the college.

This finding points to a gap between institutional expectations and the support available to academic staff in designing blended and online learning environments. Participants described being expected to respond to diverse student needs while working within constraints that limited opportunities for course development and engagement with frameworks such as QM. In practice, this often resulted in variability in course structure, organization, and navigation across programs, shaping how international students experienced their learning environments.

Research has similarly identified that professional development has not adequately responded to the complexities of teaching international students (McGregor et al., 2022). Academic staff frequently report limited access to training or guidance for inclusive digital pedagogy (Ma, 2022; Wysocka & Leja, 2020), a challenge further compounded in the college sector, where part-time instructors make up a significant proportion of the teaching workforce and are often excluded from professional learning opportunities (Singh, 2024; Usher, 2022).

In this study, this gap was evident in how academic staff described their experiences, reinforcing concerns about instructional quality and equity when institutional supports are

inconsistent. While QM provides a structured, research-informed approach to course design (QM, 2023; Shattuck, 2014; Shattuck et al., 2019), participants described uneven access to QM-related training and support. As a result, its use varied across programs and was often dependent on individual initiative rather than coordinated institutional support. This may reflect the demands associated with implementing QM as a comprehensive framework, which requires time, training, and sustained institutional support.

Previous research suggests that institutions do not always provide consistent guidance, instructional design support, or professional development for academic staff designing blended and online courses (Gregory et al., 2020). Zimmerman et al. (2020) emphasize that institutional investment in course design and professional development is essential for supporting instructional quality, while Driscoll (2023) highlights the importance of targeted instructional design support in bridging the gap between instructional intentions and inclusive practice. Without these supports, academic staff may unintentionally create barriers to learning (Baran, 2018; Elliott et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2020), a concern that was also reflected in participants' descriptions of designing and delivering blended and online courses for international students. Participants also pointed out that meeting accessibility requirements, such as AODA standards, did not necessarily translate into effective course design, highlighting a distinction between compliance and the broader considerations involved in supporting international students.

Contributions

This study contributes to scholarship on distance education and instructional quality in blended and online learning environments by highlighting the perceptions of academic staff within a Canadian college context. In doing so, it shifts attention from student experiences alone to how academic staff understand and implement course design practices. The findings suggest

Academic Staff Perceptions of QM to Support International Student

that academic staff perceive the Quality Matters (QM) framework as a useful reference point for supporting course design in blended and online learning environments, particularly in relation to structure, clarity, and consistency. Rather than being applied as a formal or standardized framework across programs, QM was more often used selectively, with academic staff drawing on elements that support course organization, alignment, and communication. At the same time, the use and impact of QM appear to be shaped by institutional conditions, including access to professional development, instructional design support, and time for course development. This highlights how academic staff perceptions of QM reflect both its potential to support inclusive course design and the limitations of uneven implementation across programs.

Across the findings, structural elements of course design, including consistency, navigational clarity, and transparent communication of expectations, function as inclusive practices for students navigating unfamiliar academic systems. This aligns with existing research highlighting the importance of clear course design and expectations in blended and online learning environments (Mittelmeier & Jung, 2022; Dennen et al., 2024). In this study, these practices are further understood as shaped by institutional conditions and the experiences of academic staff within a college context.

Greater consistency in course design across programs, including more standardized course structures, may shape how international students experience blended and online learning environments. When course structures are predictable, students are more likely to find familiar patterns in course organization, which may reduce cognitive load and minimize barriers associated with navigating course environments, particularly when locating key course

information such as learning resources, instructor details, and weekly schedules. This may better position students to focus on learning activities rather than navigating course structures.

Limitations

As an interpretive case study conducted within a single institutional context, the findings of this research are not intended to be generalized across all Canadian colleges. Instead, the study offers insights that may be transferable to similar contexts where blended and online learning environments include substantial international student populations. Although the study was based on a small sample, participants represented a range of experience across academic staff roles, providing rich and contextualized insight into institutional practices and blended and online learning within the college context. The study focused specifically on the perspectives of academic staff within one bounded institutional case. While this provides insight into institutional practices and course design processes, it does not include the perspectives and experiences of international students. Including these perspectives may further deepen understanding of how instructional practices influence student learning and engagement in blended and online learning environments.

Deuser et al. (2023) explored student perceptions of a QM-certified course, suggesting that students recognize elements of course design such as structure and clarity. Azzam et al. (2025) explored both student and faculty perspectives in blended and remote learning contexts, highlighting the value of multiple viewpoints in understanding teaching and learning experiences. Future research that includes international students' perspectives alongside those of

academic staff may further illuminate how instructional practices are experienced and how they shape student engagement in blended and online learning environments.

As a qualitative study relying on semi-structured interviews, the findings reflect participants' perceptions and experiences, shaped by individual interpretation, recall, and context. Participants emphasized certain aspects of their experiences over others, and their perspectives may not fully represent broader institutional practices. While reflexive thematic analysis supported a systematic and transparent approach to data analysis, interpretation was still shaped by my analytical lens. As an insider within the institution, my familiarity with the college context informed the interpretation of the findings. My experience at the college, which includes teaching international students in blended and online learning environments, as well as working in instructional design and educational technology roles, provided contextual insight into the practices described by participants.

This positioning provided both insight into institutional practices and an awareness of how my professional experience may shape interpretation. To address this, reflexive practices, including journaling and memoing, were used throughout the research process, alongside transparency measures such as offering participants the opportunity to review their interview transcripts. At the same time, my positionality as an insider may have influenced how patterns were interpreted, despite these efforts to support reflexivity and transparency.

Finally, the study is situated within a Canadian college context, where institutional structures, funding models, and approaches to internationalization differ from those in other national contexts, including the United States. As a result, the findings may not be directly transferable to systems with different organizational and policy frameworks. However, the study contributes to ongoing discussions about international student experiences and instructional practices in higher

education, emphasizing the importance of local institutional conditions in shaping teaching and learning.

Recommendations

Building on these findings, supporting international students in blended and online learning environments requires more than well-designed courses. It also requires sustained support for academic staff, including access to professional development, instructional design support, time for course development, and more consistent approaches to course design across the college. The following recommendations are grounded in these findings.

Strengthen Institutional Supports Across Academic Staff Roles

The findings suggest that instructional quality in blended and online learning environments is not solely the responsibility of individual academic staff; rather, it is shaped by the institutional conditions within which academic staff work. Without coordinated and ongoing professional development, the ability to provide structured and inclusive course design practices remains uneven across programs. Across the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of clear course organization, structure, and navigational clarity in supporting international students. This suggests that institutional support plays a critical role in enabling academic staff to create consistent and structured learning environments that better support international students.

When institutional supports are not prioritized, international students may be left to navigate unnecessary barriers on their own (Baran, 2018; Elliott et al., 2015; Shattuck et al., 2020). Participants expressed a strong commitment to supporting international students and described taking additional steps to help students navigate course expectations and learning environments.

Academic Staff Perceptions of QM to Support International Student

In the absence of coordinated institutional supports, academic staff take on additional responsibility to address gaps in course design and student support.

Within this context, the Quality Matters (QM) framework offers a structured approach to support the development of consistent course design practices, particularly in relation to alignment, clarity, and navigation in blended and online learning environments (Quality Matters, 2023; Shattuck et al., 2019). Even within a broader provincial context where QM has been adopted across Ontario colleges (Weber, 2017), its implementation within the institution was experienced as uneven, with variation across schools depending on leadership support. In practice, its use was shaped by these conditions and, in some cases, applied more flexibly as a blueprint informed by selected QM principles or standards. This reflects how academic staff adapt the framework in their day-to-day work rather than applying it consistently across programs.

Across the interviews, varying levels of familiarity with QM were evident, closely linked to whether school leadership had adopted the framework. In some programs, QM informed course design in more structured ways, including the use of templates, alignment of learning outcomes and assessments, and consistent navigation. In others, its use was more limited, with academic staff drawing on selected principles as a blueprint. Rather than functioning as a consistently implemented institutional framework, QM was experienced as a flexible set of practices shaped by institutional conditions, including access to professional development, instructional design support, and time for course development. Strengthening institutional support for course design is therefore central to supporting both academic staff and international students, particularly by

reducing the cognitive load associated with navigating inconsistent course structures and expectations.

Strengthen Institutional Supports for Course Design and Development

Institutional working conditions shape the sustainability of course design practices in blended and online learning environments. Research on accessible and inclusive online learning suggests that course design is closely tied to institutional supports, including collaboration with instructional designers and access to professional development (Singh, 2024). This suggests that increased reliance on part-time and contract instructors, combined with limited access to professional development (McGregor et al., 2022) and broader workload pressures, makes it difficult to sustain consistent course design practices across programs. Research on precarious academic work further highlights how these conditions are associated with increased stress, limited institutional support, and challenges in sustaining teaching practices over time (McKendrick et al., 2025).

Moving these practices to the institutional level, rather than relying on individual champions, would better position academic staff to support more structured and predictable learning environments for international students. This may include coordinated approaches to course design, clearer expectations for course structure, and increased access to instructional design support across programs (Zimmerman, 2020). These findings suggest that reliance on individual effort is not sufficient to sustain instructional quality over time. Rather, institutional conditions play a central role in shaping how course design practices are developed and maintained. Strengthening these conditions may support greater consistency across programs, particularly in contexts where course structure plays an important role in supporting international students.

Opportunities for Future Research

Several directions for future research are suggested by this study relating to course design, instructional quality, and international students in blended and online learning environments. Building on my interpretation of these findings, one area for further study is how coordinated, college-wide approaches to course design frameworks such as QM shape consistency and instructional quality across programs, particularly given that engagement with QM varies across institutions, and is not always implemented as a coordinated, institution-wide approach (Adair, 2024).

Another direction is to explore how different models of professional development support sustained engagement with course design practices among academic staff, particularly across varied roles and employment contexts. Further research may also explore how emerging technologies, including AI-supported course design and curriculum mapping tools, support the development of structured and consistent learning environments. As these tools evolve, additional research could explore how they align with established quality frameworks such as QM and how they may shape approaches to inclusive course design.

Additional research may also explore how complementary frameworks, such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), can be integrated with QM to support inclusive course design for international students. Existing research suggests that the principles of inclusive design can be used alongside quality course design frameworks (Baldwin & Ching, 2021; Lomellini et al., 2024). However, there is limited research exploring how these approaches are used within college settings. Earlier work has demonstrated that QM and UDL can be integrated to support both structured course design and flexible, accessible learning experiences (Robinson & Wizer, 2016), pointing to how these frameworks may be used together to support international students in blended and online learning environments. This could be extended by exploring how course

design supports operate across Ontario colleges, particularly given the shared use of frameworks such as Quality Matters. Comparative studies across colleges and universities in other regions of Canada may provide additional insight into how different organizational structures shape instructional quality and support for academic staff.

Finally, future research could explore how international students experience course structure, navigation, and instructional design practices in blended and online learning environments within Canadian colleges. Research that examines blended and online learning environments shaped by quality frameworks such as QM may provide additional insight into how course consistency, accessibility, and institutional supports influence student adaptation, engagement, and academic success. Longitudinal studies that follow international students over the course of their studies may further enhance understanding of how these experiences evolve over time.

Final Reflection

The findings of this study suggest that instructional quality in blended and online learning environments is shaped not only by course design practices, but by the institutional conditions that enable academic staff to implement and sustain them. When academic staff have access to professional development, collaboration, and instructional design expertise, they are better positioned to create structured and inclusive blended and online learning environments that support international students. As higher education continues to evolve, demand for flexible and accessible blended and online learning opportunities is increasing (Simunich et al., 2025). From the participants' perspectives, rapid growth in international student enrolment was not always accompanied by corresponding changes in course design practices or institutional supports. Participants described variability in access to professional development and instructional design support, suggesting that efforts to support an increasingly diverse student population were not

implemented consistently across programs and departments. These experiences highlight the importance of institutional investments in academic staff development and instructional support as student populations and learning environments continue to evolve.

These experiences reflect broader sector concerns that increasing international student enrolment placed pressure on the college system, infrastructure, student supports, and housing (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2023). While recent federal policy changes have altered enrolment patterns, with Ontario experiencing one of the largest reductions nationally in new study permit approvals (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2026), these changes have significant implications for Ontario colleges, including program restructuring and staffing adjustments. Sector reports indicate up to 10,000 job losses and over 600 program cancellations linked to declining international student enrolment (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2026; CTV News, 2025). Since data collection was completed, the Canadian postsecondary sector has continued to experience significant change. Statistics Canada (2026) estimates suggest substantial declines in international student enrolment following federal policy reforms, with Ontario colleges experiencing some of the largest decreases nationally. These developments highlight the dynamic nature of the policy and institutional environment surrounding international student education.

At the same time, this changing landscape may create an opportunity for colleges to re-examine how internationalization has been operationalized within teaching and learning environments. While institutional attention has often focused on recruitment and enrolment growth, the findings of this study suggest the importance of strengthening the conditions and resources available to academic staff responsible for designing and delivering blended and online learning environments.

Despite these sector changes, the need for high-quality learning environments remains. As colleges continue to serve increasingly diverse student populations and as demand for flexible learning opportunities grows, consistent instructional and institutional supports remain important. International students continue to be an important part of Canadian postsecondary education, and the findings of this study reinforce the importance of maintaining instructional environments that support their success while also benefiting other diverse learners. In this context, institutional conditions play a critical role in shaping how instructional quality and student support are experienced. The findings indicate that, in the absence of a coordinated institutional approach, course design may vary across programs, contributing to uneven learning experiences. The QM framework may offer a practical reference point for supporting greater consistency, structure, and accessibility in course design. However, its effectiveness depends on the broader institutional conditions that support its implementation and sustained use.

At its core, this study highlights that supporting international students is not only a matter of course design, but also of how institutions support the academic staff responsible for designing and delivering those courses. Instructional quality is positioned as a shared institutional responsibility rather than one that rests solely with individual academic staff. Through the research process, my understanding of instructional quality has shifted. What initially appeared to be a matter of course design became more clearly connected to the conditions that shape how those practices are implemented. This has influenced how I understand academic staff as individuals working within systems that enable or constrain their ability to support students. This perspective will shape how I approach my own practice within the college context. Greater attention to consistency, structure, and coordinated support for academic staff now appears

central to supporting international students. More broadly, these findings reinforce the importance of approaching instructional quality as a shared institutional responsibility.

As a researcher, this process has deepened my awareness of how my experience within the institution shapes interpretation. My familiarity with the college context allowed me to recognize patterns in participants' experiences, while also requiring ongoing reflexivity to ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in the data. As a scholar-practitioner, I hope to continue contributing to conversations related to instructional quality, inclusive course design, and academic staff support within blended and online learning environments in Canadian postsecondary education. As learners continue to seek flexible learning opportunities, I believe it is important that instructional quality remains at the forefront of institutional decision-making. While this study focused on international students, the findings suggest that practices such as consistency, structure, accessibility, and coordinated institutional support have the potential to benefit a broad range of learners. Blended and online learning environments also have the potential to expand access to educational opportunities for learners who may otherwise encounter barriers to participation in postsecondary education. However, realizing that potential requires ongoing attention to instructional quality, accessibility, and inclusive course design. Moving forward, I intend to support these efforts through professional practice, research, scholarly publication, conference participation, and ongoing advocacy for evidence-informed approaches to teaching and learning. In doing so, I hope to contribute to conversations about high-quality, inclusive blended and online learning environments that not only support international students, but also promote equitable and accessible learning experiences for all learners across Canadian postsecondary education.

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Appendix A: Quality Matters Rubric Standards Higher Education 7 Ed.

General Standards	Specific Review Standards	Points
Course Overview and Introduction	1.1: Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.	3
	1.2: Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.	3
	1.3: Communication guidelines for the course are clearly stated.	2
	1.4: Course and institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated within the course, or a link to current policies is provided.	2
	1.5: Minimum technology requirements for the course are clearly stated, and information on how to obtain the technologies is provided.	2
	1.6: Technical skills and digital information literacy skills expected of the learner are clearly stated.	1
	1.7: Required prior knowledge in the discipline and/or any specific competencies are clearly stated in the course site.	1
	1.8: The self-introduction by the instructor is welcoming and is available in the course site.	1
	1.9: Learners have the opportunity to introduce themselves.	1
Learning Objectives (Competencies)	2.1: The course-level learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable.	3
	2.2: The module/unit-level learning objectives describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives.	3
	2.3: Learning objectives are clearly stated, are learner-centred, and are prominently located in the course.	3
	2.4: The relationship between learning objectives, learning activities, and assessments is made clear.	3
	2.5: The learning objectives are suited to and reflect the level of the course.	3
Assessment and Measurement	3.1: The assessments measure the achievement of the stated learning objectives.	3
	3.2: The course grading policy is stated clearly, available at the beginning of the course, and consistent throughout the course site.	3
	3.3: Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of learners' work, and their connection to the course grading policy is clearly explained.	3
	3.4: The course includes multiple types of assessments that are sequenced and suited to the level of the course.	2
	3.5: The types and timing of assessments provide learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress with timely feedback.	2
	3.6: The assessments provide guidance to the learner about how to uphold academic integrity.	1
Instructional Materials	4.1: The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated learning objectives.	3
	4.2: The relationship between the use of instructional materials in the course and completion of learning activities and assessments is clearly explained.	3
	4.3: The course models the academic integrity expected of learners by providing both source references and permissions for use of instructional materials.	2
	4.4: The instructional materials represent up-to-date theory and practice in the discipline.	2
	4.5: A variety of instructional materials is used in the course.	2
Learning Activities and Learner Interaction	5.1: The learning activities help learners achieve the stated objectives.	3
	5.2: Learning activities provide opportunities for interactions that support active learning.	3
	5.3: The instructor's plan for regular interaction with learners in substantive ways during the course is clearly stated.	3
	5.4: The requirements for learner interaction are clearly stated.	2
Course Technology	6.1: The tools used in the course support the learning objectives.	3
	6.2: Course tools promote learner engagement and active learning.	2
	6.3: A variety of technology is used in the course.	1
	6.4: The course provides learners with information on protecting their data and privacy.	1
Learner Support	7.1: The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to obtain it.	3
	7.2: Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's accessibility policies and accommodation services.	3
	7.3: Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's academic support services and resources that can help learners succeed in the course.	3
	7.4: Course instructions articulate or link to the institution's student services and resources that can help learners succeed.	1
Accessibility and Usability	8.1: Course navigation facilitates ease of use.	3
	8.2: The course design facilitates readability.	3
	8.3: Text in the course is accessible.	3
	8.4: Images in the course are accessible.	2
	8.5: Video and audio content in the course is accessible.	2
	8.6: Multimedia in the course is easy to use.	2
	8.7: Vendor accessibility statements are provided for the technologies used in the course.	1

* Meeting QM Specific Review Standards does not guarantee or imply that specific laws, regulations, or policies of any country are met.

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Appendix B: Letter of Information

Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Research on Blended Learning

Principal Investigator (Researcher):

Michele Halle

Email: mhalle1@learn.athabascau.ca

Athabasca University

Supervisor(s):

Dr. Aga Palalas

Athabasca University

Email: agapalalas@athabascau.ca

Dr. Pamela Walsh

Athabasca University

Email: pamelaw@athabascau.ca

Dear (Participant).

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled ‘Exploring Academic Staff Perceptions of the Quality Matters Framework to Support International Students in Blended Learning Environments at a Canadian College’.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. The information presented should give you the basic idea of what this research is about and what your participation will involve, should you choose to participate. It also describes your right to withdraw from the project. To decide whether you wish to participate in this research project, you should understand enough about its risks, benefits and what it requires of you to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully as it is important that you understand the information given to you. Please contact the principal investigator, Michele Halle, if you have any questions about the project or would like more information before you consent to participate.

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

Introduction

My name is Michele Halle, and I am a Doctoral student in the Distance of Education degree program student at Athabasca University. As a requirement to complete my degree, I am conducting a research project about how academic staff—including faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants—perceive the Quality Matters (QM) framework and its

Academic Staff Perceptions of QM to Support International Student

potential to support inclusive course design for international students in blended learning environments. For the purposes of this study, “Blue Jay College” is used as a pseudonym to protect the identity of the institution and its staff. This name does not refer to an actual college. I am conducting this project under the supervision of Dr. Aga Palalas and Dr. Pamela Walsh.

Why are you being asked to take part in this research project?

You are invited to participate in this project because you are in the role of academic staff at “Blue Jay College” that is — Faculty, Instructional Designer or Curriculum Consultant.

What is the purpose of this research project?

I am interested in your insights and experiences related to designing, teaching, or supporting blended courses that include international students. Your perspectives may help inform future strategies for faculty development and blended course design in the Canadian college context. You do not need prior experience with the QM framework to participate

What will you be asked to do?

If you choose to participate, I will invite you to a one-on-one semi-structured interview that will last 60–90 minutes. Interviews will be conducted via Zoom or Microsoft Teams at a time that is convenient for you. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed to ensure accuracy. You will have the opportunity to view the transcript to clarify or alter your comments.

What are the risks and benefits?

There are no known risks or direct personal benefits. There are no direct benefits to participants, however, your participation may contribute to improving how the “Blue Jay” college support academic staff and international students in blended learning environments.

Do you have to take part in this project?

As stated earlier in this letter, involvement in this project is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All information you share will be kept strictly confidential. **The last point at which data can be withdrawn is before the transcript has been verified and finalized. Once transcripts have been finalized, de-identified, and incorporated into the analysis, it will no longer be possible to remove individual data contributions.**

How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected?

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants’ identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use or disclosure. Your privacy and confidentiality will always be maintained during this study. To protect your confidentiality, a pseudonym will be assigned to you, and no identifying information will be included in

transcripts or reports. All data will be securely stored, and only the researcher will have access to it. After transcripts are checked for accuracy, all direct identifiers will be removed, and no identifiable information will be retained.

All participants will be anonymous. Hard data, such as audio recordings, will be kept secure and all transcripts will be encrypted with password protection. All information will be held confidential, except when legislation or a professional code of conduct requires that it be reported.

How will my anonymity be protected?

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance. Pseudonyms will be assigned, and all identifying information will be removed prior to analysis to protect participant confidentiality. Transcripts and coded data will be stored securely on an encrypted institutional server, accessible only to the researcher.

Every reasonable effort will be made to ensure your anonymity; you will not be identified in publications without your explicit permission.

How will the data collected be stored?

Informed consent forms will be completed electronically. Participants will receive the form as a PDF via email and will be asked to type their name and date the form to indicate consent. The signed forms will be returned by email to the researcher. Upon receipt, the forms will be saved in a separate password-protected folder on the researcher's Athabasca University-provided OneDrive account. Access to these forms will be restricted to the researcher and the dissertation supervisors. The forms will be retained securely for the required period (5 years) and then permanently deleted.

This study will use Zoom or MS Teams to collect data, which is an externally hosted cloud-based service. When information is transmitted over the internet privacy cannot be guaranteed. There is always a risk your responses may be intercepted by a third party (e.g., government agencies, hackers). Further, while the researcher(s) will not collect or use IP address or other information which could link your participation to your computer or electronic devices without informing you, there is a small risk with any platform such as this of data that is collected on external servers falling outside the control of the research team. If you are concerned about this, we would be happy to make alternative arrangements (where possible) for you to participate, perhaps via telephone. Please contact Michele Halle @ mhalle1@learn.athabascau.ca for further information.

Please note that it is the expectation that participants agree not to make any unauthorized recordings of the content of a meeting / data collection session.

Who will receive the results of the research project?

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Participants can request an executive summary of the research. There is no anticipated future secondary use of the data. The researcher may seek to publish findings from the final thesis in peer-reviewed professional journals or present at conferences.

The existence of the research will be listed in an abstract posted online at the Athabasca University Library's Digital Thesis and Project Room and the final research paper will be publicly available.

Who can you contact for more information or to indicate your interest in participating in the research project?

Thank you for considering this invitation. If you have any questions or would like more information, please contact me (the principal investigator) by e-mail at mhalle1@learn.athabascau.ca. If you are ready to participate in this project, please complete and sign the attached Consent Form and return it by (Date).

Thank you.

Michele Halle

This project has been reviewed by the Athabasca University Research Ethics Board. Should you have any comments or concerns about your treatment as a participant, the research, or ethical review processes, please contact the Research Ethics Officer by e-mail at rebsec@athabascau.ca or by telephone at 780.213.2033.

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Your signature confirms:

- You have read what this research project is about and understood the risks and benefits.
- You have had time to think about participating in the project and had the opportunity to ask questions and have those questions answered to your satisfaction.
- You understand that participating in the project is entirely voluntary and that you may end your participation at any time without any penalty or negative consequences.
- **You understand that the last point at which data can be withdrawn is before the transcript has been verified and finalized**
- You have been given a copy of this Informed Consent form for your records; and
- You agree to participate in this research project.

	YES	NO
I agree to be audio-recorded		
I agree to be video-recorded		
I agree to the use of direct quotations		
I agree to the use of audio recordings in dissemination		
I agree to the use of video recordings in dissemination		
I am willing to be contacted following the interview to verify that my comments are accurately reflected in the transcript.		

Signature of Participant

Date

Principal Investigator's Signature:

I have explained this project to the best of my ability. I invited questions and responded to any that were asked. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in participating in the research project, any potential risks and that they have freely chosen to participate.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study Title:

Exploring Academic Staff Perceptions of the Quality Matters Framework to Support International Students in Blended Learning Environments at a Canadian College

Purpose:

This semi-structured interview guide was developed to explore how academic staff, faculty, instructional designers, and curriculum consultants, perceive the Quality Matters (QM) framework in relation to supporting international students in blended learning environments. The guide is organized into four thematic sections and is designed to prompt open-ended conversation. Not all questions may be answered directly; responses may emerge naturally through discussion. Prompts may be adapted depending on participant role and experience.

Interview Introduction (Read aloud by researcher)

Thank you for agreeing to participate. This interview is part of my doctoral research at Athabasca University and has received ethics approval from both Athabasca University and Fanshawe College. The purpose of the study is to explore how academic staff perceive the Quality Matters (QM) framework and its potential to support inclusive course design for international students in blended learning.

I recognize that some participants may not have prior familiarity with QM. If needed, I will provide a brief overview before we discuss any QM-related questions. You are encouraged to share your perspectives based on your own experiences, professional background, or initial impressions. It's a quality assurance framework that provides a rubric and peer-review process to guide the design of blended and online courses, focusing on areas like course alignment, accessibility, engagement, and learner support

Participation is voluntary. You may skip any question or end the interview at any time. With your permission, I'll record the interview to ensure I accurately capture your responses. You'll also have an opportunity to review the transcript and revise or remove any content.

This will be a relaxed and informal conversation. While I have some guiding questions prepared, please feel free to elaborate or reflect in your own way. Some of your insights may emerge naturally even if we don't ask about them directly.

To begin, could you briefly describe your current role—such as faculty member, instructional designer, or curriculum consultant—and how your work connects to blended course design or support for international students?

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: General Experiences with Blended Learning and International Students (All Roles)

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1. To the extent that it applies to your work, what kinds of supports, whether institutional, instructional, or professional, have helped (or could help) you support international students in blended learning environments?
2. Have you encountered any challenges related to international student needs in blended courses, either directly or indirectly through your work with others?
3. Can you think of any strategies, practices, or course design features you've used or supported that seemed effective for international students?

Optional prompt: If this hasn't come up much in your work yet, feel free to speak more generally about supporting diverse learners in blended settings.

Section 2: Professional Development and Frameworks

4. Have you engaged in any professional development, either formal or informal, that relates to blended learning or supporting diverse learners, including international students?

Faculty: Have you had opportunities to apply any of those strategies in your own teaching?

Instructional Designers/Curriculum Consultants: How have you supported others in applying those ideas?

5. Are you familiar with the Quality Matters (QM) framework?

If yes:

- In, what ways have you used it, encouraged its use, or seen it applied in course design or support work?
- In your view, how well does QM align with the needs of international students? Are there any limitations or areas it doesn't fully address?

If no:

I'm happy to give a brief overview. Quality Matters, or QM, is a nonprofit organization that provides a set of research-based standards for reviewing and improving the design of online and blended courses. The framework includes a rubric organized into areas such as learning objectives, assessment, instructional materials, learner interaction, and accessibility. Many institutions use QM for internal course reviews, professional development, or quality assurance processes. In this study, QM is considered as one example of a quality assurance framework that could support inclusive course design for international students.

Follow-up prompt (optional):

Based on that, do you see ways it might, or might not, address some of the challenges we've discussed?

Section 3: Course Design, Accessibility, and Inclusion

6. How do you, or how do you support others to, communicate course structure and expectations clearly in blended courses?
7. What strategies do you use, or recommend, to make learning objectives and assessments clear, fair, and culturally inclusive?
8. How do you select, or support the selection of, course materials that are relevant and accessible for international students?
9. What types of activities or approaches have helped promote engagement and interaction for international students in blended learning?
10. Have you encountered any specific benefits or challenges with the technologies used in blended courses, particularly for international students?
11. How do you help students become aware of available support services, like tutoring, writing help, or tech assistance, within the course environment?
12. What steps do you take, or recommend, to support students with different language proficiencies, technology access, or learning needs?
13. Are there any institutional policies, practices, or resources that have helped, or hindered, your efforts to support international students?

Section 4: Feedback and Reflection

14. In your role, how do you typically receive feedback about international students' experiences in blended courses?

Faculty: Does feedback tend to come through formal evaluations, informal conversations, or other means?

Instructional Designers/Curriculum Consultants: Have you received feedback indirectly, such as through faculty, course reviews, or design discussions?

15. Can you share an example of feedback, formal or informal, that influenced a change in your teaching, course design, or the way you support others?

Optional prompt: This could be something that led you to revise content, rethink communication, or adjust course structure or assessments.

Appendix E: Ethics Approval



Certification of Ethical Approval

CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

The Athabasca University Research Ethics Board (AUREB) has reviewed and approved the research project noted below. The REB is constituted and operates in accordance with the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2) and Athabasca University Policy and Procedures.

ETHICS PURE ID 14844376

Principal Investigator/Faculty Michelle Halle, Graduate Student, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

Supervisor: Agnieszka Palalas, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

Project Title: Exploring Academic Staff Perceptions of the Quality Matters Framework to Support International Students in Blended Learning Environments

Effective Date: July 15, 2025

Expiry Date: July 14, 2026

Restrictions:

Any modification to the approved research activities must be submitted to the AUREB for approval prior to proceeding. Any adverse event or incidental findings must be reported to the AUREB as soon as possible, for review.

Ethical approval is valid *for a period of one year*. A request for renewal must be submitted and approved by the above expiry date if a project is ongoing beyond one year.

An Ethics Final Report must be submitted when the research is complete (*i.e. all participant contact and data collection is concluded, no follow-up with participants is anticipated and findings have been made available/provided to participants (if applicable)*) or the research is terminated.

Approved by:

Date: July 15, 2025

Eloy Rivas Sanchez, Chair
Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences Departmental Ethics Review Committee
Athabasca University Research Ethics Board