

Guidelines:

Learner Demand

These guidelines identify considerations and offer advice for substantiating, documenting, and demonstrating learner demand for new programs (and specializations) in the development of comprehensive program proposal submissions.

The ministry is committed to a program review and approval process that includes considerations of learner demand as an important measure of a program's viability and sustainability.

The ministry supports new program proposals that reflect learner demand. This is one of the methods that the ministry employs to prevent undue exposure to risk, for both the proposing institution and the system, resulting from implementation of new programs.

Scope

These guidelines pertain to program proposals submitted by post-secondary institutions to the ministry through PAPRS (Provider and Programs Registry System).

The guidelines are intended to help institutional staff in the development of proposals for new non-credential, certificate, diploma, and degree programs (and first-level specializations) but can be used for program reactivation proposals as well.

Guiding Principles

- Demonstration of learner demand is an essential element of the program development process since it informs multiple other aspects of the process.
- Learner demand for a program should be viable and sustainable over short and medium terms.
- Innovative programming is essential to a vibrant and modern post-secondary system.
- Programming at publicly funded post-secondary institutions should primarily serve the social and economic interests and needs of Alberta students.
- Program demand should be contextualized with specific geographic locale(s), particularly for institutions that are regional stewards.

Learner Demand and Programming Development

Demand from learners should be a prime consideration in the development of new programming. In many cases, this demand will be the primary impetus behind the development of a new program.

As part of the program development process, institutions need to evaluate potential learner demand in order to:

- establish the need for a proposed program; and
- gauge the impact that the proposed program will have on both an institution's and the system's resources.

Institutions should demonstrate that they have collected quantitative data relating to learner demand, studied and analyzed that data, and can anticipate learner demand for the proposed program into the future with a level of confidence.

Although anecdotal evidence can be helpful, it is not sufficient on its own to measure and demonstrate learner demand.

Identifying Possible Learner Demand

In an early stage of the development process for a new program, institutions should consider what form(s) demand from learners for a program is likely to take.

Considerations in this regard include (but are not limited to):

- source of the demand (internal or external to the institution);
- geographic make-up of demand (local, regional, national, and/or international);
- characteristics of the likely cohort (e.g., recent high school graduate, mature learner, working professionals, etc.); and
- the anticipated duration of the demand.

Institutions need to make such assumptions about the origin and nature of potential learner demand in order to begin testing these premises and documenting the results for the purposes of a new program proposal to the ministry.

Substantiating and Documenting Learner Demand

Institutions can substantiate and document learner demand for a program in multiple ways, depending on the type and nature of the program and the identified target population(s) for the program.

Common methods include (but are not limited to):

- surveys of groups (e.g., high school students) identified as likely applicants;
- enrollment figures in related programs at the institution or at nearby institutions;
- tabulation of prospective student inquiries;
- waitlists for similar or related programs;
- Application Submission Initiative (ASI) data on the number of applications and registrations for similar programs, preferably in the same service region;
- research on demographic trends in a region;
- surveys of existing students, graduates and/or professionals in the field;
- consultations with the program advisory committee (PAC) at an institution, external stakeholder group, or a regulatory or professional body related to the proposed program of study; and
- outreach/consultation efforts with targeted learner populations to promote the proposed program and gauge interest.

Institutions should demonstrate that demand for the proposed program comes from potential applicants who will be likely to meet the admission requirements for the proposed program.

Demonstrating Learner Demand

The templates for new program proposals ask questions regarding demand for the proposed program with a focus on how demand was determined and whether this demand is sustainable over the medium term.

The ministry expects institutions to demonstrate that:

- they have identified a likely pool of qualified applicants for the proposed program; and
- program demand is not temporary, but can be reasonably expected to continue for the foreseeable future (subject to natural ebbs and flows).

(In some instances, demand for a program may be only temporary. In these situations, it is recommended that institutions submit a proposal with a request for a term-limited approval for the program.)

In answering the template's questions, institutions should be transparent in documenting the research undertaken to ascertain potential learner demand. In particular:

- If surveys of potential applicants are included as evidence, institutions should provide information on sample size, survey instrument and response rate.
- Description of findings should be provided within the proposal template or as attachments.
- Summaries or minutes of meetings with stakeholder groups and regulators or letters of support from these groups should be provided.

When there are data gaps or lack of information on labour market demand, other factors can be used to supplement the rationale for a new program, such as the community benefits of a program, learner demand, and industry support letters.

Incorporating Student Demand into Other Elements of a Proposal

Demonstration of learner demand should also inform other aspects of new program proposals. In particular, the research and analysis undertaken to substantiate this demand should be incorporated into:

Enrolment Planning - Research and analysis conducted about student demand for a proposed program should be fully integrated into enrolment plans.

In particular, enrolment targets should align with the documented demand and the cohort mix of domestic to international students.

Labour Market Outcomes - By identifying the type of learner most likely to enrol in a program, institutions should be able to better forecast labour market outcomes by incorporating into their analyses the levels of work experience, academic credentials, and other characteristics with which students can be expected to enter the program.

For example, if recent high school graduates (rather than mature working professional) have been identified as the likely pool of students, this fact should influence the types of positions into which program graduate are likely to ladder.

Budgetary Planning - Budgetary plans for the proposal program should align with the forecasted demand for a program and associated enrolment planning.

By assessing demand for a program and then developing an enrolment plan that is reflective of this demand, institutions should be able to more accurately forecast the program cost (both direct and indirect) and, in that way, mitigate against potential financial risks.

System Co-ordination Review Criteria

During the system co-ordination review process, ministry staff use data and analyses provided by institutions concerning learner demand as a way to evaluate program viability and sustainability.

Typically, a strong proposal will provide data from a variety of sources, although the evidence needed varies by proposal.

The ministry appreciates that it may not always be possible to gather such evidence for an unproven and/or untried program of study. In these cases, institutions should make their best efforts to gather such evidence but also describe recruitment and public awareness campaigns intended to create demand for the proposal program as well as risk mitigation strategies developed to lessen possible negative impacts should learner demand be less than projected.

As a general rule, the ministry does not support the development of undergraduate programming that is designed primarily for international learners.

Learner Demand for Reactivated Programs

With some suspended programs, especially those that have experienced an extended period of inactivity, the ministry may require institutions to provide evidence of continued demand for a program before approving reactivation, particularly if the program was suspended due a lack of demand from learners.

The advice and considerations offered in this guideline is applicable in such cases.

Further Information and Assistance

For additional information contact:

Director, Program Design and System Innovation

Alberta Advanced Education

780-643-9472

Related Guidelines:

- Labour Market Demand
- Enrolment Planning
- Societal and Community Benefits
- Budgetary Planning
- Proposal Timelines
- Program Reactivations

Other related documents:

- PAPRS
Templates

To obtain a copy of other guideline documents, or to ensure that you have the most recent copy of this guideline, please send a request via email to ae.psp-paprs@gov.ab.ca.