

Guidelines:

Program Learning Outcomes

These guidelines describe the functionality and benefits of addressing program learning outcome considerations in proposals undergoing a system coordination review by the ministry.

Program learning outcomes serve as a foundation for student learning and curriculum development, evaluation, and accountability. They clarify what students are expected to know and be able to do at the completion of a program.

Program learning outcomes drive academic decision-making about curriculum, program delivery, and resourcing, and shift evaluation emphasis away from input measures to direct assessment of learning achievements.

Scope and Definitions

These guidelines pertain to proposals submitted by institutions through the Provider and Programs Registry System (PAPRS). Proposals can be for non-credential, certificate, diploma, and degree programs, primarily in matters concerning new programs and new specializations. Institutions typically develop learning outcomes at three hierarchical levels:

- course learning outcomes;
- program learning outcomes; and
- institutional learning outcomes (focused on graduate attributes)

Program learning outcomes are the knowledge, skills, or behaviours that a program's students should be able to demonstrate upon completion. Outcomes represent broad statements incorporating many areas of inter-related knowledge and skills developed through a range of courses and experiences during the program. They represent the big picture, describe broad aspects of behavior, and encompass multiple learning experiences.

The ministry reviews and approves programs of study rather than individual courses; course and institutional learning outcomes are outside the scope of this guideline.

Development of program learning outcomes is the purview of institutions; the ministry does not evaluate these outcomes but uses them to inform analysis of proposal elements (e.g., program distinctiveness or labour market outcomes) critical to the system coordination review process.

Quality considerations for degrees are out of scope. Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) conducts quality reviews of degree proposals. CAQC publishes program standards and other materials that address expectations and requirements concerning learning outcomes.

Guiding Principles

- Program learning outcomes are grounded in academic decision-making processes and institutional quality assurance policies.
- Program learning outcomes should align with credential descriptors and outcomes for specific credentials as documented in credential and qualification frameworks.
- Program learning outcomes should align with institutional learning outcomes (graduate attributes) as per institutional policy and practices.
- Program learning outcomes can help to inform the design of courses and programs, review of program quality, and assessment of transfer credit.
- Program learning outcome assessment is an academic evaluation process, involving direct assessment of learning achievements.

Program Development

In the initial planning stage for new or revised programs, institutions should use program learning outcomes when:

- considering program distinctiveness and program duplication;
- assessing the extent and significance of potential program changes;
- aligning resourcing decisions with program requirements; and
- developing metrics against which effectiveness of a program can be measured and as a basis upon which improvements to the program can be made.

Program Proposal

PAPRS templates for new programs and for change proposals include questions about program learning outcomes. In addressing these questions, it is expected that:

- program learning outcomes should be listed, with statements included as to how these learning outcomes align with characteristics and standards of the particular credential being proposed;
- program learning outcomes that are specific to work integrated learning (WIL) components of a program should be referenced, when applicable;
- program learning outcomes should serve as a basis upon which program of study and course descriptions are developed;
- program learning outcomes should be linked to institutional outcomes (graduate attributes) when applicable; and
- certificate and diploma program proposals should include statements about how the institution developed and/or validated learning outcomes.

Institutions should show linkages between program learning outcomes and proposal elements, as applicable.

- Proposals for new programs/specializations and change proposals should refer to program learning outcomes when documenting the need for the program/specialization and its distinctiveness from other similar programs within the Alberta post-secondary learning system.
- Proposals for new programs/specializations should reference program learning outcomes when charting student pathways.
- Proposals for new or changed programs/specializations should reference program learning outcomes when documenting labour market demand.

System Coordination Review

During system coordination review processes, ministry staff use program learning outcomes to inform analysis about:

- alignment with credential frameworks;
- alignment with institutional quality standards;
- appropriate linkages to WIL components;
- program distinctiveness and graduate attribute considerations; and
- justifications associated with potential program duplication matters.

In addition, program learning outcomes can inform decision-making about whether program changes are more appropriately managed through new program or program change proposals.

Transfer Credits

Another important use of program learning outcomes is assessment of transfer credits, particularly related to prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) and block transfer applications.

(Course learning outcomes are more typically used when considering individual course transfer applications.)

Program learning outcomes can facilitate credit transfer decisions by:

- serving as a reference point or common language for describing programs; and
- shifting the focus away from satisfaction surveys to results of learning.

Further Information and Assistance

For additional information contact:

Director, Program Design and System Innovation

Alberta Advanced Education

780-643-9472

Related Guidelines:

- Program Duplication
- Enrolment Planning
- Proposal Timelines

Other related documents:

- Advanced Education
Adult Learning System Principles
- CAQC Handbook
- Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework
- 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.