

A Learning Alberta

Quality in Alberta's Advanced Education System

A Discussion Document

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A Learning Alberta

Alberta will be a province where all Albertans have access to higher learning opportunities. It will be a province that aggressively seizes the opportunities of the future by leveraging the skills, talents and imaginations of its citizens. And it will be a province that will enjoy even greater success in the century ahead thanks to a solid foundation and legacy of higher learning that we will create together.

Albertans will be inspired to reach their full potential through advanced learning - to move beyond where they are now to where they can be. But most of all, Alberta will become a true learning province, where advanced education and lifelong learning is the cornerstone of a healthy, prosperous and progressive society.

Dave Hancock, Riverbend Ragg-Times

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1 Introduction

1.1 The *A Learning Alberta* Context

Alberta's Minister of Advanced Education has initiated a comprehensive exercise to establish a new vision for the province's advanced education system. Through the *A Learning Alberta* initiative, a revised vision and new policy outcomes for Alberta's advanced education system will be articulated. Together the revised vision and policy framework will support development of a committed learning society in Alberta – one that inspires and motivates all interested and able Albertans to maximize their own potential and contributions to society, the economy, and future generations.

The *A Learning Alberta* initiative has started public discussion on system-wide issues related to Alberta's development and growth as a learning society. Discussion documents have been released to start dialogues on affordability, accessibility, investing, rural access, innovation, and shaping the system direction. Additionally two resources documents have been released to support the discussion papers.

This document focuses on obtaining stakeholder feedback on how to identify and ensure a high quality advanced education system in Alberta. It reviews Alberta's current system of quality assurance and assessment measures, proposes a framework to guide our thinking on quality in advanced education, and concludes with key questions.

1.2 Process and Feedback

This paper on quality in advanced education complements the other discussion documents on affordability, accessibility, investing, rural access, innovation, and shaping the system direction. Together, responses to these documents will feed into the *A Learning Alberta* steering committee. This steering committee was established by the Minister to guide development of a new vision and policy outcomes for Alberta's advanced education system. It is anticipated that a preliminary vision and framework will be presented at the Minister's Forum, scheduled for Fall 2005. Individuals and groups interested in providing comments to this document may submit responses no later than August 19, 2005 to:

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Alternatively, submissions can be provided by e-mail to: alarning.alberta@gov.ab.ca.

1.3 Policy Context

The Government of Alberta's commitment to advanced education is evident through its twenty-year strategic plan, *Today's Opportunities, Tomorrow's Promise*. This plan envisions Alberta as a vibrant and prosperous province where Albertans enjoy a superior quality of life and are confident about the future for themselves and their children. There are four pillars or areas of opportunity that support the realization of Alberta's vision: unleashing innovation; leading in learning; competing in a global marketplace; and making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit. A high quality advanced education system is a key component of all four pillars, and by extension, a key component of the Government of Alberta's strategic vision.

Currently, Alberta Advanced Education directly supports the achievement of the twenty-year strategic plan through strategies identified in its business plan. For instance, under the leading in learning pillar, business plan strategies include implementing the Campus Alberta Quality Council to enhance access to a quality education.

2 Context and Background Information

2.1 Understanding and Defining Advanced Education Quality

Before a discussion on quality within Alberta's advanced education system can occur, it is essential to develop a common understanding of what is meant by both advanced education and quality. For this discussion, advanced education refers to the full range of learning opportunities available to adult Albertans including apprenticeship programs, community-based programs and post-secondary learning opportunities.

In terms of quality within an advanced education environment, quality is not a self-evident or universally accepted term. It is multi-dimensional and means different things to different stakeholders. This is not to say that an overall judgment of what defines quality cannot be made. For example, many of Alberta Advanced Education's performance measures and indicators (refer to Section 2.4) have been selected because they are considered to be measurements of system quality. These measures indicate and define the dimension of quality currently used by Alberta Advanced Education.

Similarly, other jurisdictions have defined quality from their unique perspective and constructed performance measures to assess dimensional levels of quality preferred for their situation. The same can be said for all advanced education stakeholders, whether this means a learner, a taxpayer or a member of society. Each stakeholder has their own unique set of indicators that define dimensions of quality relevant to their situation.

In this light, and for the purposes of this discussion document, a quality advanced education system is defined as one where:

The advanced education system meets the needs of learners, society and the economy.

It is important to note that this definition emphasizes development of measures that focus on advanced education system outcomes (such as the skills of graduates) rather than inputs (teaching equipment, library resources) and outputs (number of credentials awarded). However, it must also be emphasized that system outcomes cannot be considered in isolation. Other dimensions that may have substantial influence on system quality include affordability to learners, system investments, accessibility, innovation, and shaping the future direction of Alberta's advanced education system.

2.2 Principles Underlying a Quality Advanced Education System

When considering measures of advanced education quality and a framework to assess quality, it is important to consider the principles that guide Alberta's advanced education system. The *A Learning Alberta* initiative provides an opportunity to confirm the policy objectives required to create a learning society in Alberta. We seek your feedback on the following system-wide draft principles.

Accessible: all qualified Albertans who are inspired to pursue advanced education studies have the opportunity to do so, particularly historically under-represented Albertans.

Collaborative: there is collaboration among advanced education providers, the private sector, and non-profit and community organizations. This principle recognizes that providers and other partners working collaboratively toward the same outcomes can be more effective than independent action.

Cost-sharing: both learners and society (taxpayers and the private sector) share the costs of the advanced education system in recognition of the benefits received.

Innovation and excellence: the system is designed to encourage and reward innovation and excellence within the advanced education system.

Learner centered: the system is focused on enabling lifelong learning for all learners.

Representative: the advanced education system is representative of Alberta society, and supports and encourages participation of historically under-represented groups.

Responsive: the system is flexible and anticipates and meets the needs of learners, society and the economy.

2.3 Government of Alberta Accountability Cycle

It is important to consider the concept of advanced education system quality within the context of the Government of Alberta's overall accountability framework. This framework incorporates rigorous planning and reporting requirements – on both fiscal and non-fiscal measures – that allow for an independent assessment of results achieved and responsiveness to change. Performance measures that assess quality within Alberta's advanced education system will need to consider this accountability framework.

2.3.1 Overview

As part of its fiscal restructuring program of the mid 1990's, the Government of Alberta implemented a comprehensive business plan, annual report and performance measurement system – requirements that have since been firmly established within the *Government Accountability Act*.

Adoption of this accountability cycle was in large part a response to public concern that governments were not adequately demonstrating how resources, programs and policies were effective at producing intended results. Implementation of the cycle was intended to enhance openness and transparency, and shift government's focus from reporting on inputs, or the amount of resources allocated to reporting on outcomes, or the results achieved through those resources. From an advanced education perspective, adoption of the accountability cycle has the potential to enhance learners' abilities to make informed choices on potential programs of study.

2.3.2 Government of Alberta Strategic Directions

Alberta's current accountability cycle is a tiered process. At the peak of this tier is the Government of Alberta's twenty-year strategic plan. This plan is based on four pillars (areas of opportunity) for the province to maximize its potential. Central to Alberta Advanced Education is the Leading in Learning pillar, which provides the overarching direction for Alberta Advanced Education's business plan. The next tier, the Government of Alberta business plan, contains macro-level performance measures that report on high level outcomes of priority to Albertans. It aligns government goals with the four pillars in the twenty-year strategic plan.

The Government of Alberta business plan drives the planning process of government departments. Alberta Advanced Education's business plan goals and strategies align most closely with the Government of Alberta's business plan Goal 2 – Albertans will be well prepared for lifelong learning and work. In addition to Alberta Advanced Education's business plan performance measures, the ministry relies on a large number of internal management information measures to determine progress on day-to-day activities. Much of the information for these internal measures is gathered and stored in ministry information systems such as the Learner Enrolment Reporting System and the Key Performance Indicators Reporting System.

2.3.3 Business Plans, Annual Reports and Performance Measures

Within the Government of Alberta, business plans are ongoing three-year plans that identify goals and the performance measures that will be used to track progress in achieving these goals. At the end of each fiscal year performance measure results and additional management information are incorporated into an annual report.

Performance measures serve a number of purposes. They are used to communicate to members of the public the more critical aspects of government operations – those operations and activities that government should be judged on. Additionally, within government, performance measures function as motivators for government personnel to make continual improvements to programs and policies to achieve stated goals. Stretch targets are set for each performance measure to facilitate continual improvement in government programs and policies. These stretch targets are partially based on historical data trends, but can also be set through benchmarking, which involves a comparison of performance against other similar jurisdictions.

2.4 A Selection of Current Processes to Ensure Quality

The Government of Alberta recognizes that a highly educated population and superior advanced education system are foundations of innovation within the global knowledge-based economy. Advanced education opportunities offer considerable benefit to the learner, society and the economy. For this reason, as well as the accountability considerations discussed earlier, Alberta Advanced Education continually measures and reports on quality within the advanced education system. Furthermore, there are many quality assurance and assessment processes that are external to government, but contribute toward ensuring programs are of high quality. The following sections represent a selection of current processes that help to ensure quality in Alberta's advanced education system.

2.4.1 Apprenticeship and Industry Training Programs

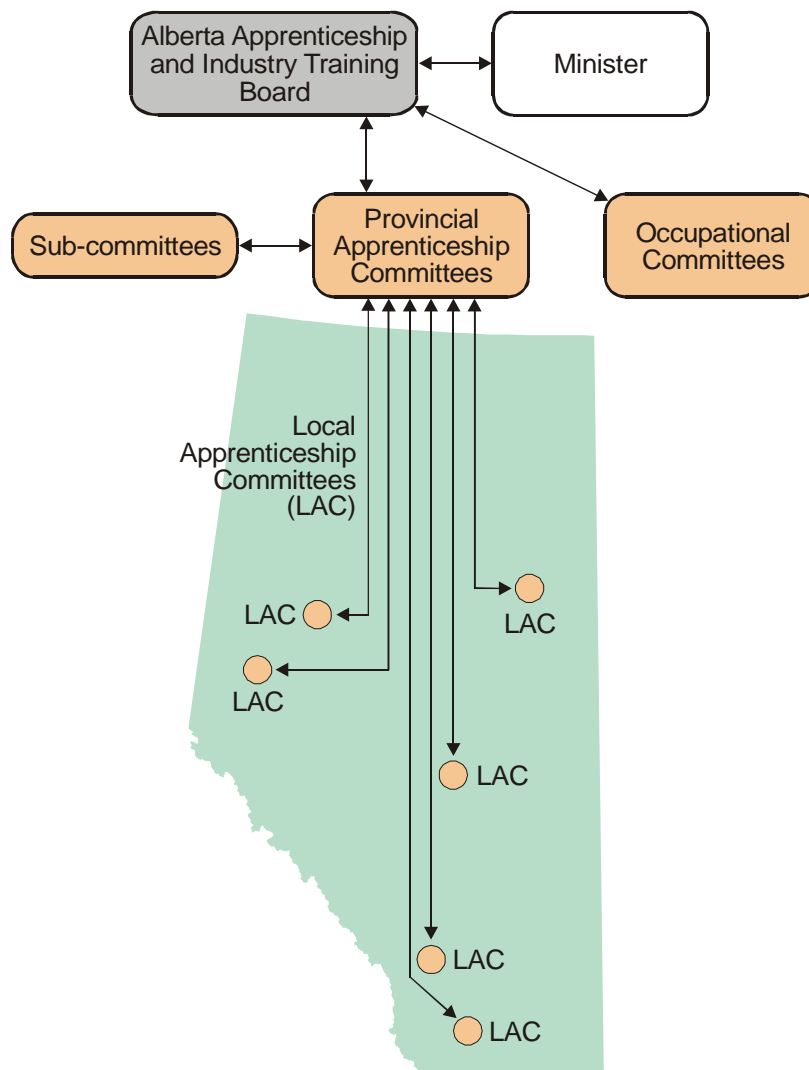
Alberta's apprenticeship and industry training system is an industry-driven system that ensures a highly skilled, internationally competitive workforce in over 50 designated trades and occupations. This workforce supports the economic progress of Alberta and its competitive role in the global market.

Industry (employers and employees) establishes training and certification standards and provides direction to the system through an industry committee network and the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board (the Board). The Government of Alberta provides the legislative framework and administrative support for the apprenticeship and industry training system through the Minister and the Apprenticeship and Industry Training division of Alberta Advanced Education.

To ensure quality, provide advice to the Minister, and provide strategic direction to the system, the Board draws on the expertise of the industry committee network (refer to the flow diagram below). The role of industry committee network includes:

- recommending to the Board the standards for the skills and competencies required for certification;
- establishing technical training course outlines;
- monitoring changes and identifying the need for improvements in training;
- recognizing related training and certification; and
- making recommendations to the Board about the designation or re-designation of trades and occupations.

Apprenticeship and Industry Training System Structure and Organization



The Board is accountable to Albertans for the performance of the apprenticeship and industry training system and is committed to pursuing the highest level of performance. Measures of quality and effectiveness of the system include surveys of employer satisfaction and apprentice graduate satisfaction.

The employer survey seeks to understand employer satisfaction with the effectiveness of apprenticeship training and the responsiveness of the apprenticeship and industry training system to the skill requirements of the Alberta economy.

The apprentice survey measures graduates' satisfaction with their apprenticeship training program (including technical training, on-the-job training, and administration of the apprenticeship program by department field office staff), determines graduates' labour market experiences; and determine graduates' views about key factors determining successful completion of apprenticeship training.

2.4.2 Community-based Programs

Adult Albertans across the province are able to access part-time, non-credit learning opportunities offered by local community-based providers (including 83 Community Adult Learning Councils and 73 literacy programs). To ensure quality, community-based providers develop annual program/business plans based on an assessment and prioritization of community and adult learning needs as well as an evaluation of activities and programs. Particular attention is paid to providing access to adult learners with participation barriers.

Program/business plans are submitted to Alberta Advanced Education, which must approve the business case prior to offering funding. A sample of performance measures community-based providers are required to report on include:

- articulation of the barriers addressed by the organization to ensure access to programs (may include financial, language, and geographic barriers);
- number of learners accessing further reduced or waived fees;
- learner satisfaction; and
- number of learners indicating programming helped them achieve their learning goals.

Additionally, there is an array of nonprofit community organizations across Alberta offering family literacy programs. The provincial evaluation framework developed for all funded family literacy programs guides the quality of these activities. Programs report annually on a number of established outcomes and have access to standard evaluation tools developed by Alberta Advanced Education. Outcomes measured include:

- parental satisfaction with the family literacy program;
- parental confidence and ability to support their own healthy language and literacy development; and
- parental understanding of the role of literacy in child development.

2.4.3 *Private Vocational Programs*

Alberta has approximately 140 private institutions offering licensed vocational programs under authority of the *Private Vocational Schools Act*. These programs are vocation specific, generally less than one-year in duration, and are created to respond to current labour market demands. Alberta Advanced Education assesses private institutions interested in offering a new program based on criteria that include:

- labour market need;
- curriculum relevancy (against industry standards);
- appropriateness of admissions processes;
- instructor qualification;
- capacity for program delivery; and
- capacity for student services.

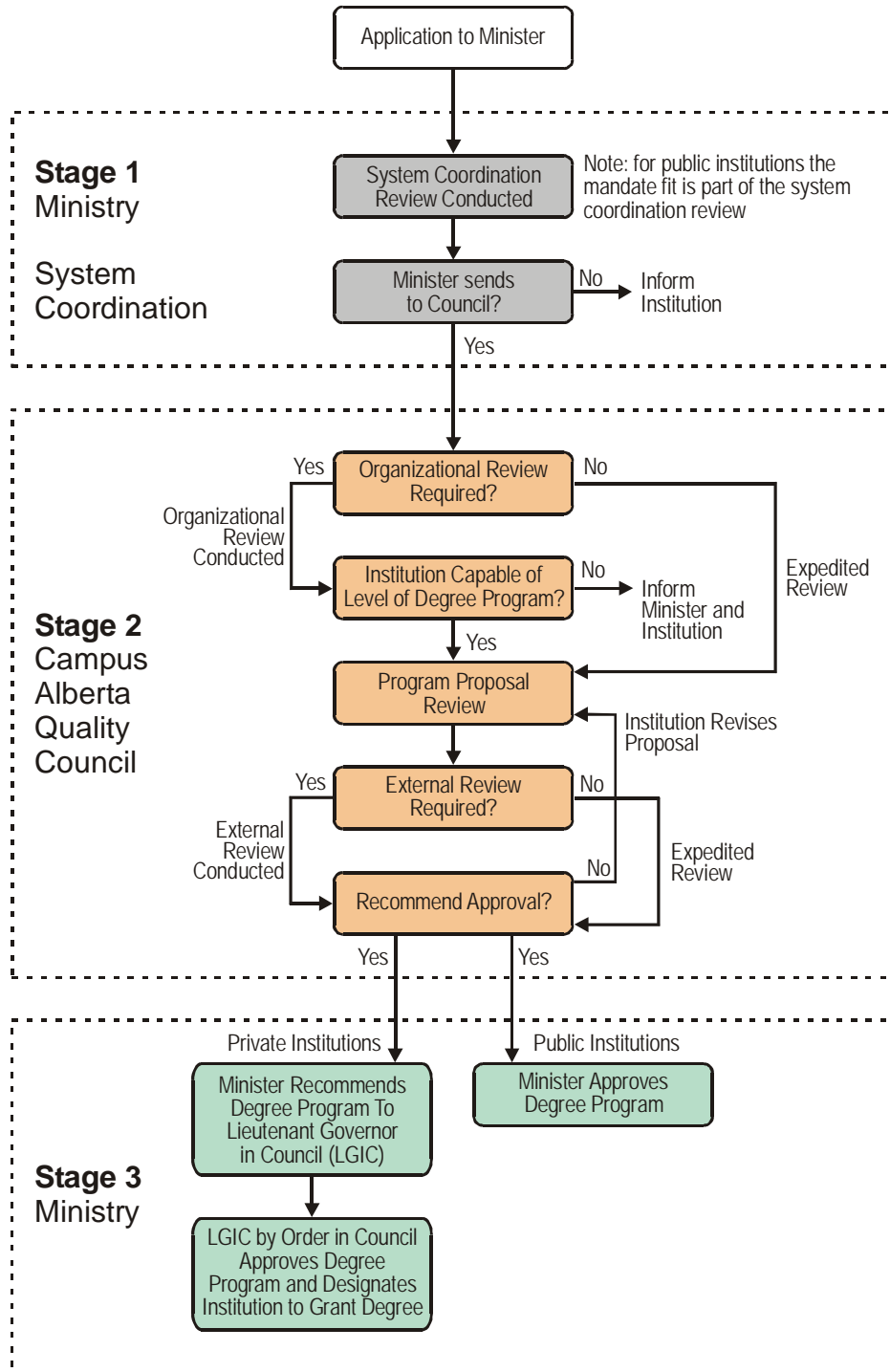
In addition to completing an assessment of new programs, Alberta Advanced Education also completes rigorous ongoing monitoring of private vocational programs to ensure strong program completion rates and strong related employment rates for program graduates.

2.4.4 *Degree Programs*

The Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) is an eleven member group that operates under the authority of the *Post-secondary Learning Act* to assess the quality of new degree programs within Alberta's advanced education system. The CAQC uses nationally and internationally recognized assessment standards and procedures, including external experts, to assess proposed degree programs and the institutions applying to offer them. Proposals are first assessed by Alberta Advanced Education to ensure system coordination (refer to the flow diagram on the following page). The premise behind system coordination is that the degree program should be justified within a broader system context. If a proposal can demonstrate this system-wide need, it is referred to the next assessment stage (which is completed by the CAQC).

Institutions that are proposing their first degree program (or a first degree program at a new level) are subject to an organizational review by the CAQC using external reviewers. This review ensures the institution is able to deliver and sustain high quality degree programs that offer an education of sufficient breadth and rigour to meet national and international standards at recognized post-secondary institutions. Organizational

Degree Program Proposal Review Process



components assessed by the CAQC include the institution's mandate and mission, its governance and administration capacity, its academic policies, as well as its financial resources, faculty and staff, and information services.

If the CAQC concludes that the institution is capable of offering the proposed degree program, the proposal is then subject to a program proposal review (this review can be external or expedited). Program components assessed include program faculty and staff, physical resource capacity (equipment, computing facilities and library resources), credential recognition, program content and structure, as well as provisions for periodic review and improvement of the program once implemented. If the degree program is recommended for approval the proposal is forwarded to the Minister for consideration. Once approved, the CAQC has the responsibility to monitor the new degree program to ensure continued compliance to its quality standards and conditions.

2.4.5 Non-Degree Programs

The Minister, following a review within the Department of Advanced Education, approves proposals for new certificate and diploma programs and also approves significant modifications to existing programs. Quality is assessed and assured through program review.

To begin with, each review considers the proposed program or program change in the context of the mandate statement approved by the Minister. New programs and program changes are reviewed in the context of the department's responsibility to ensure responsiveness to emerging educational and labour market trends, encouraging collaboration among institutions, providing for student access and affordability, and preventing unwarranted program duplication. A sample of quality assurance and assessment indicators used in program review include:

- reflection of the proposed program within the institution's strategic plan and current business plan;
- demonstrated student and labor market demand for the program;
- demonstrated viable human resources, financial capacity, and a facilities and equipment plan to support the delivery of a quality program; and
- relation of the proposed program and curriculum structure to goals.

The program approval process for certificate and diploma programs is a collaborative quality assurance and assessment process. Consultations with appropriate stakeholders such as industry and professional associations are required to ensure the program is relevant to their needs. Additionally, the institutional provider also identifies the standards and processes it will use to ascertain the effectiveness of the program.

2.4.6 Public Post-secondary Institutional Processes

Alberta's advanced education institutions work most closely with learners, and through this close relationship, are in a strong position to ensure quality within Alberta's advanced education system. In response, institutions have adopted a wide range of practices, methods and instruments to ensure programs are of high quality. For example, committees such as academic councils, general faculties councils and program advisory committees all work to assess and assure program quality through a rigorous review of new program proposals and changes to existing programs, as well as the periodic assessment of existing programs.

Advanced education institutions also work within the Government of Alberta's accountability cycle, and as such are required to prepare business plans and annual reports. These documents are closely aligned with the goals of Alberta Advanced Education and the Government of Alberta. Additionally, many of the performance measures used by Alberta Advanced Education (refer to Section 2.4.8) and indicators included within the post-secondary performance envelope (refer to Section 2.4.9) are relied upon by institutions to assure and assess quality.

2.4.7 Professional Association Processes

A number of professional associations (such as the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Institute of Chartered Accountants, and the Association of Professional Engineers, Geologists and Geophysicists of Alberta) work closely with advanced education providers to ensure that curricula are relevant and that programs meet professional and industry standards. This comprehensive program accreditation process ensures that graduates have the skills and abilities necessary to effectively practice their profession and obtain related employment.

2.4.8 Business Plan Performance Measures

Alberta Advanced Education's business plan contains a number of performance measures that are used to assess quality and promote accountability within the advanced education system. These measures include:

- satisfaction of recent post-secondary graduates;
- satisfaction of recent apprenticeship graduates;
- employment rate of Albertans, age 25-34, by level of educational attainment;
- post-secondary participation rate;
- educational attainment of Albertans, age 25 to 64;
- apprenticeship and post-secondary completion rates;
- high-school to post-secondary transition rate; and
- employer satisfaction with the skill and quality of work of graduates.

2.4.9 *Post-secondary Performance Envelope*

As a basis to reward outcomes and assure high quality at the institutional level, Alberta Advanced Education's Post-secondary Performance Envelope rewards publicly funded post-secondary institutions with one-time funding based on institutional performance on a set of indicators. These indicators address a range of system policy outcomes, including access, program quality, and research excellence (several indicators are also business plan performance measures). Specifically, the current performance envelope indicators are:

- enrolment growth;
- satisfaction of recent graduates;
- employment of recent graduates;
- administration expenditure efficiency;
- revenue generation through entrepreneurial activities;
- sponsored research awards;
- citation impact of research papers;
- community and industry support of research activity; and
- revenue generation through research activity.

3 An External Perspective on Quality

A commitment to both advanced education quality and the continued reflection on how to properly assess and assure quality is certainly not unique to Alberta Advanced Education or the *A Learning Alberta* initiative. A wide range of organizations such as independent policy think tanks, interest groups, other governments and academia all generate resources that focus on the issue of advanced education quality. However, for the purposes of the *A Learning Alberta* initiative, a review of these resources was restricted to outcomes-focused analyses (as opposed to inputs-focused) that approached quality from a system-wide perspective.

Through a review of these resources it became apparent that many studies advocate a strategic approach to assess and assure quality. For most, this strategic approach relies on utilization of a framework to help structure the concept of advanced education quality. This approach allows for information and data to be presented and applied in a rational and measured way. One of the more recent external resources to advocate use of a conceptual framework was a paper released by the Canadian Policy Research Network (an independent, national policy think tank).

In their paper, the research network argues that the status quo approach to quality assessment and assurance, however intensive and informative, does little toward measuring overall quality. They recommend adoption of conceptual frameworks to support a more system-wide and strategic assessment of advanced education quality. The framework reviewed within their paper relies on four factors: beginning characteristics; learning inputs; learning outputs; and final outcomes.

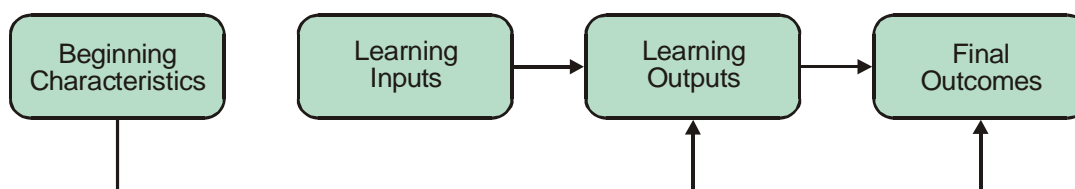
Beginning characteristics represent the characteristics and abilities of incoming students as they start their programs (such as critical thinking and analytic reasoning). These characteristics can influence both learning outputs and final outcomes (refer to the flow diagram below).

Learning inputs represent input components such as institutional financial resources, library facilities and information technology. These inputs influence learning outputs, which flow through to affect final outcomes.

Learning outputs represent the skill sets of graduates that result from their educational experiences (such as communication skills and working with others). These outputs influence final outcomes.

Final outcomes represent the end results that the educational system can contribute to (such as employment rates, job satisfaction and citizenship).

CPRN Quality Assessment Framework

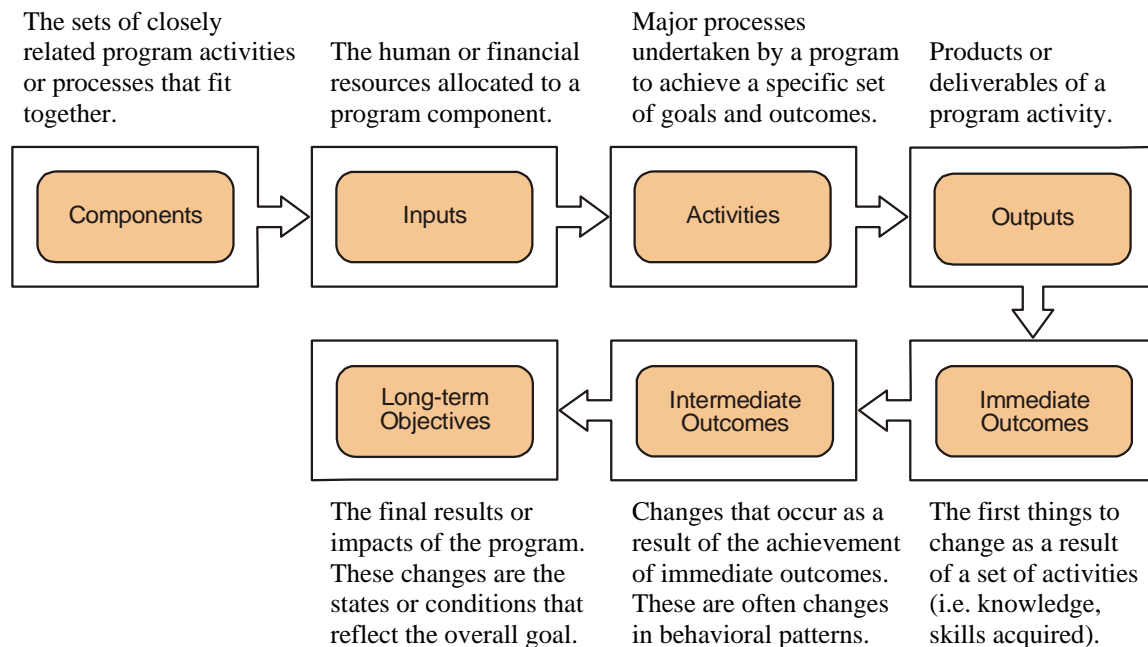


Based on this conceptual framework the research network recommends the collection of relevant data within each of the four factors. Once sufficient longitudinal data are available, they believe that a more rigorous assessment of advanced education quality can be made, at both a system-wide level as well as at an institutional level.

4 Proposed Quality Assessment Framework

By taking a broader perspective on quality through use of a conceptual framework, a rational and measured consideration of quality within Alberta's advanced education system can be made. To further facilitate this discussion paper on quality, an assessment framework broadly similar to that identified by Canadian Policy Research Network is proposed (refer to the flow diagram on the following page).

A Learning Alberta Proposed Quality Assessment Framework



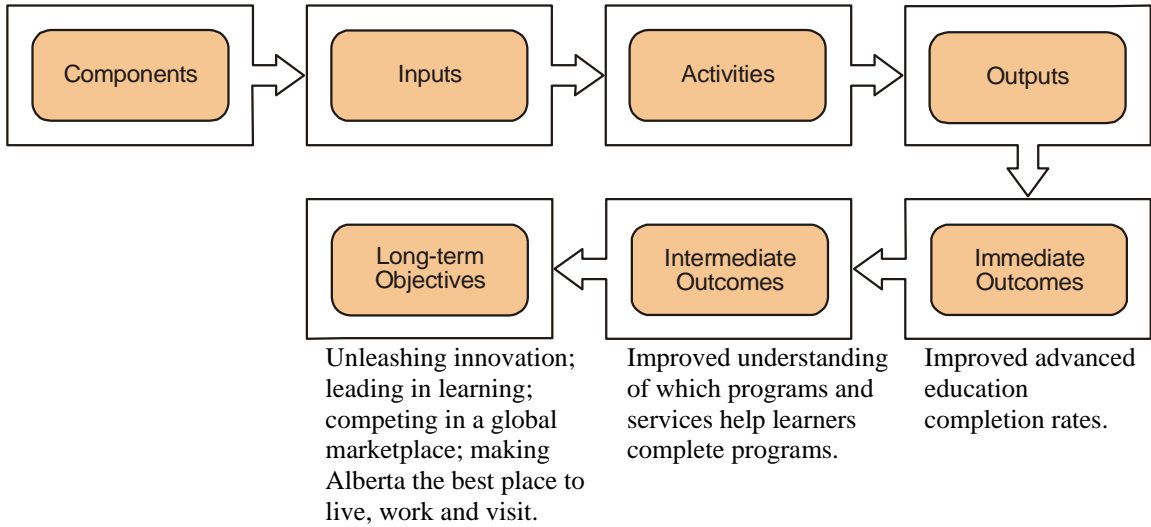
The proposed framework is based on the understanding that quality is multi-dimensional – quality defined by one group may not signify quality to another. Additionally, the framework builds on the four factors identified by the Canadian Policy Research Network through adoption of seven factors: components; inputs; activities; outputs; immediate outcomes; intermediate outcomes; and long-term objectives (these factors are described in the flow diagram on the preceding page).

To use the framework it is necessary to work backwards – the identification of long-term objectives will inform the level of inputs and the types of activities needed to produce immediate and intermediate outcomes. Measures to assess quality can then be identified for select factors within the framework (such as immediate outcomes and intermediate outcomes). Examples of how the quality assessment framework could work – based on the definition of quality provided in this paper (meeting the needs of learners, society and the economy) as well as the Government of Alberta's four pillars as contained in the twenty-year strategic plan – are described in the following three sections.

4.1 Meeting the Needs of Learners

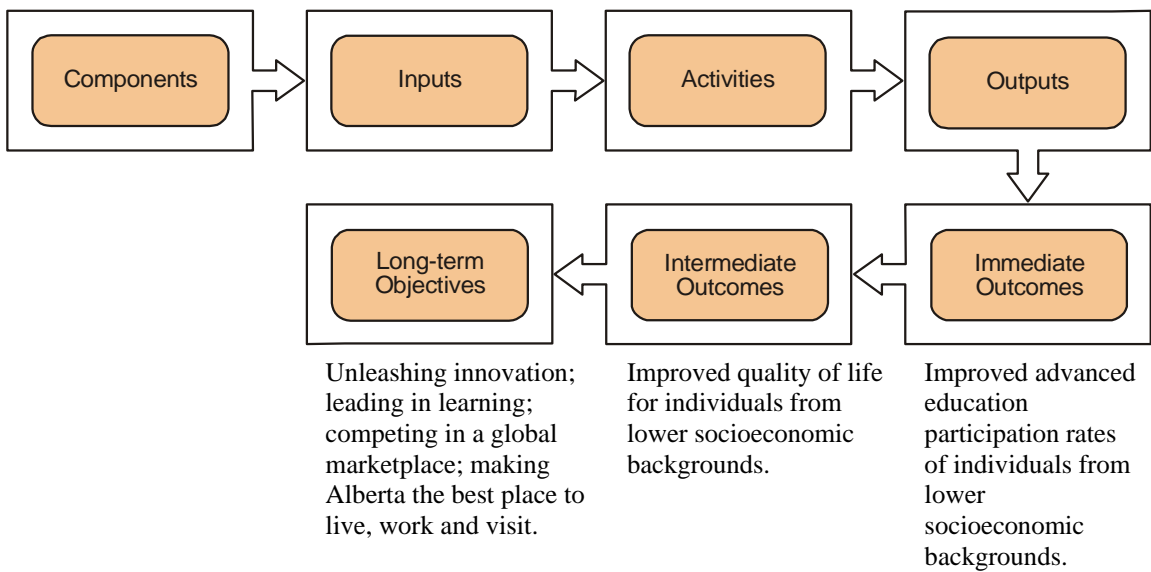
Under Alberta's long-term objectives of: unleashing innovation; leading in learning; competing in a global marketplace; and making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit – an important intermediate outcome for learners could be an improved understanding of which programs and services (offered by both institutions and government) help students complete (refer to the flow diagram on the following page).

A reasonable immediate outcome would be improved advanced education completion rates. From this, an appropriate measure of quality would be one that measures advanced education completion rates.



4.2 Meeting the Needs of Society

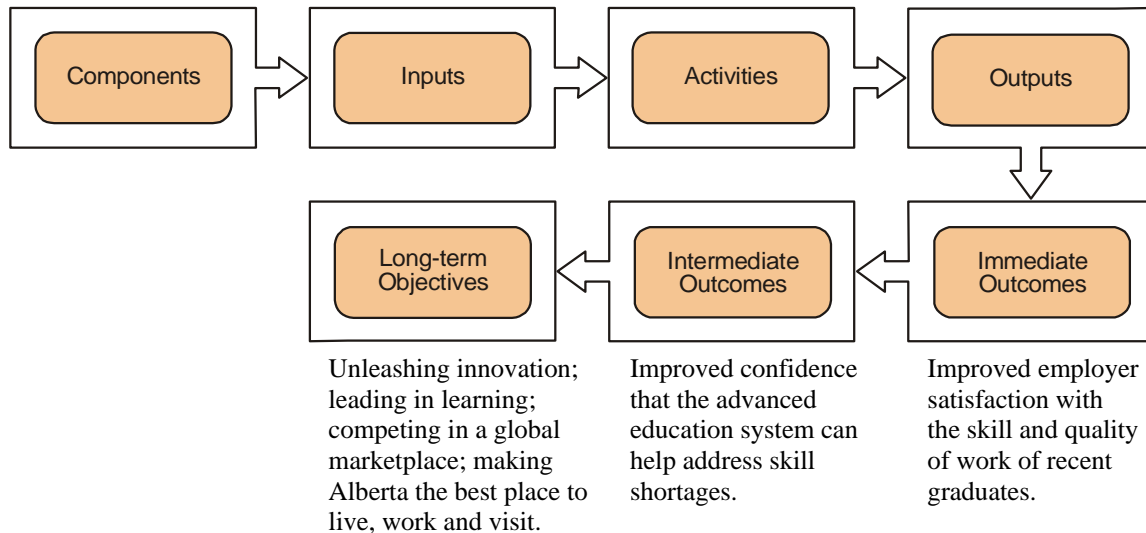
Similarly, under Alberta’s long-term objectives of: unleashing innovation; leading in learning; competing in a global marketplace; and making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit – an important intermediate outcome for society could be an improved quality of life for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (refer to the flow diagram below).



A reasonable immediate outcome would be increased participation rates of individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (given that higher levels of educational attainment are generally associated with higher levels of quality of life). From this, an appropriate measure of quality would be one that measures the advanced education participation rates of individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

4.3 Meeting the Needs of the Economy

Finally, under Alberta's long-term objectives of: unleashing innovation; leading in learning; competing in a global marketplace; and making Alberta the best place to live, work and visit – an important intermediate outcome for the economy could be improved labour market confidence that Alberta's advanced education system can help address anticipated skill shortages (refer to the flow diagram below). A reasonable immediate outcome would be improved employer satisfaction with the skill and quality of work of recent graduates. From this, an appropriate measure of quality would be one that measures the employer satisfaction with the skill and quality of work of recent graduates.



5 Conclusion

This discussion document outlines current processes to assure and assess advanced education quality within Alberta. Additionally, a multi-dimensional definition of quality is provided – a quality advanced education system meets the needs of learners, society and the economy. A quality assessment framework is also proposed to support a broader discussion on quality – one that will hopefully allow for a rational and measured consideration of Alberta's advanced education system.

It is important to note that this discussion document presents one way to think about advanced education quality. It is not meant to be an exhaustive consideration of the topic. The aim of the *A Learning Alberta* initiative is to begin a fruitful dialogue with stakeholders to engage them into dedicating thought, energy, and action into continually improving Alberta's advanced education system – a system that inspires and motivates all interested and able Albertans to maximize their own potential and contributions to society, the economy, and future generations.

6 Key Questions

As mentioned in the introduction, the purpose of this document is to obtain stakeholder feedback on how to identify and ensure a high quality advanced education system in Alberta. To help guide written submissions prepared in response to this document, key questions are identified below.

1. Is the proposed definition of quality – an advanced education system that meets the needs of learners, society and the economy – appropriate? If not, what is an appropriate definition? If so, what are the needs of learners, society and the economy?
2. Are the principles underlying a quality advanced education system (refer to Section 2.2) appropriate? Are there further principles that require consideration?
3. Are Alberta Advanced Education's current processes to assure and assess quality (refer to Section 2.4) appropriate? If not, what additional processes should Alberta Advanced Education adopt to assure and assess quality?
4. Is the proposed quality assessment framework (refer to Section 4) an appropriate way to focus our thinking on identifying and ensuring a quality advanced education system? If not, how can the discussion around quality be more appropriately framed? If so – and based on the needs of learners, society and the economy – how can we measure these needs to assure and assess quality?
5. How can we further enhance our understanding of quality within Alberta's advanced education system?