



ACAT Research Plan – ACAT Council February 2015

The Need:

The Alberta Council on Admission and Transfer needs to know what is happening to Alberta students who travel our learner pathways. Having spent the last forty years building a sophisticated transfer system, ACAT and its various stakeholders need to have a more informed understanding of how well it works. We know, through ACAT's mobility reports, that students are traveling between institutions in ever increasing numbers – 17,000 of them in the last twelve months. Yet we do not even know how many of these are transfer students let alone how smooth their pathways are. Nor do we know much about the students who are travelling other pathways such as progress from secondary to post secondary, Prior Learning Assessment, Dual Credit or, for that matter, transfer from other provinces and countries. Indeed, as an Associate Vice President Enrollment Management at one of member institutions put it at a recent meeting, when it comes to the transfer system in Alberta “we don't know what we don't know.” The way to know more is by conducting research on learner pathways and the student experience.

Clearly carrying out research on the system is part of the ACAT mandate. Our Mandate and Roles statement notes that among the Duties and Responsibilities of Council is the need to “make all reasonable efforts to ensure that the advice provided to the Minister is evidence-based.” (p.3). According to the same document, the Ministry, for its part, is responsible for supporting the Council in a number of areas including “providing research funds.” (pp.3-4) The Council will find ways to conduct the research as inexpensively as possible.

We need to understand learner pathways better for a number of reasons: so that we know where improvements need to be made in order to serve students even better; so that we can reassure the member institutions and the Minister that the system is the best that it can be; so that the secretariat can operate the system at maximum efficiency and therefore minimum cost; and so that the Council can develop good policy for the future. Research results will also enable us to share best practices and to establish a level of accountability among institutions. Research projects will be informed by feedback from students, the institutional members and the ACAT committees. The Council has developed this research plan with the goal of

better understanding and thereby building greater confidence in the Campus Alberta system.

Research areas:

There is a sense in which, given our lack of knowledge of how the system of learner pathways works, research on any aspect of ACAT operations would be an improvement. But in a time of limited resources it is particularly important to establish priorities so that we can get the most value for money right from the start of the research. There is a need for researching all of the areas listed below, but ACAT has developed the following priority order for this work.

1. Transfer credit

While ACAT is involved in the development and maintenance of other learner pathways, the transfer system is still the one that most students moving from one institution to another use. It is critical to know how the transfer system is working and that requires evidence-based answers to the following questions:

- How many students are transferring and with how many credits into Alberta institutions?
- Does the credit transferred come from one institution or many?
- What are the levels of satisfaction with the transfer process?
- In what directions are transfer student moving?
- How well does the transfer process serve students?
- How many credits are transferred and how many are rejected?
- When credit was not granted what were the challenges for students and institutions and where did they happen?
- Are there particular programs that attract higher numbers of transfer students?

- In what programs is transfer impeded because available seats are limited?
- How successful are transfer students and do they complete the credential that they transfer to?
- How successful are transfer students compared to direct entry students?
- What is the proportion of full time and part time among transfer students?
- How does transfer affect student, institutional and, therefore, government costs?

Other questions will undoubtedly emerge as we carry out this research.

2. Admission practices

The admissions part of the ACAT mandate is another area where we have very little evidence based knowledge. ACAT has recently established a sub committee to look at admissions into post-secondary institutions from the secondary system and it has reminded us of the need for research in this area. All predictions expect a substantial increase in Alberta's school age population in the next decade and therefore many more students will be moving from secondary to post-secondary. That influx, particularly if there is no increase in the number of seats in the institutions, will place great strains on the admissions pathway. So we need to know how this pathway is working for students and we could partner with Apply Alberta on this work. We should start by looking at the following questions and, here too, others will arise.

- What are the institutional policies on direct entry students?
- What is happening in programs where admission is very competitive?
- Are admission GPAs increasing across the board and/or in particular programs?

- How are under-represented groups (particularly First Nations and Aboriginal students) faring on the admission pathway?
- Are there gender differences in admission numbers?
- What is the admission experience like for rural and urban students?
- What happens to those students who do not get admitted to an Alberta institutions?

3. PLAR credit

PLAR has recently become an ACAT responsibility and it is still a work in progress. We need to know what is working and what are the challenges for students seeking to transfer experience into post secondary credits and what are the challenges for institutions that limit the granting of credit.

4. Dual credit

Dual Credit has also recently become an ACAT responsibility and there are a number of agreements across the Province between secondary and post-secondary institutions to enable student to pursue dual credit opportunities. Here again, we need to know how these agreements are working with a view to assessing student motivations, experiences and outcomes.

5. Interprovincial transfer

ACAT is working with its PCCAT partners to carry out preliminary research with a view to creating greater understanding and compatibility among provincial transfer systems. We urge the Ministry to support the second phase of this work.

Research approaches and methods:

ACAT will establish a research sub committee to oversee the implementation and development of this research plan. It will be necessary to make decisions as we move forward about specific research projects and

the methods to be used. The research sub committee will also report to Council on the results of this work.

There are two reviews of ACAT currently under way. The first is the review that will lead to the renovation of TAARS system and the second is the Learner Pathways and ACAT review of the entire learner pathways system in Alberta being conducted by the Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education. The ACAT Learner Pathways sub committee will also be looking into the role that learning outcomes can play in the transfer system. All of these reviews will provide a great deal of qualitative evidence based on stakeholders' impressions of how the system is working and where it should go in the future. This evidence will be very helpful, however, it will not provide a complete picture.

What is also needed is systematic quantitative and statistical evidence on how students are moving along the learner pathways. There are three ways in which ACAT can start this research.

1. The secretariat is working with others in the Ministry to ascertain whether the LERS system can be adapted to provide transfer as well as mobility numbers. The Ministry is supporting a pilot project that will give us a sense what will be involved in this change.
2. We need to work with the Registrar's offices in the institutions to enable them to report on transfer data. This will require some resources to encourage this work. The British Columbia Council on Admission and Transfer found that small amount of incentive money played a big part in facilitating this initiative. We should start with a few institutions as a pilot project and then learn from that initial experience.
3. We need modest amount of research money to assist third party researchers (most likely from our member institutions) to conduct research on specific topics such as how successful are transfer students and what are the factors that limit the granting of transfer credit? Again, the British Columbia Council on Admission and Transfer, which has a very successful and revealing research program, has found that this approach produces maximum results with limited resources.

There is no doubt that Alberta has a very good learner pathways system that has been developed over a forty year history and serves large numbers of

students. Now we need to know exactly how good this system is and to fulfill ACAT's mandate to provide-evidence advice to the Minister and our members and stakeholders. Research on the learner pathways will provide the evidence to move the system from good to great.