

Albert Council on Admissions and Transfer Report on the Learning Outcomes Forum held on 18 May 2016 at Mount Royal University

The one-day forum on Post Secondary Student Learning Outcomes was a collaborative initiative by the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer (ACAT), the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) and the Ministry of Advanced Education. An invitation was extended through the Senior Academic Offices to each institution in the system and also to the student organisations and the two councils, all of which sent representatives to the Forum resulting in over one hundred people attending.

Objectives:

1. To share experiences and effective practices within Alberta institutions around the use of learning outcomes at the institutional level, in the design of new programs and courses, in the review of quality of programs and courses, and in the assessment of course and program transfer.
2. To provide an overview of the potential role for learning outcomes and their assessment in quality assurance in Alberta, Canada, and internationally.
3. To provide an overview of the potential role for learning outcomes and their assessment in course and program transfer in Alberta, Canada, and internationally.
4. To inform the Campus Alberta Quality Council, the Alberta Council on Admissions and Transfer, and the Ministry of Advanced Education with respect to the use and assessment of learning outcomes.
5. To identify the necessary conditions and opportunities for effectively using learning outcomes in the quality assurance and transfer arrangements at the institutional and system levels.
6. To identify next steps in sharing of information or collaboration within Alberta with respect to learning outcomes.

From ACAT's point of view, the purpose of the Forum was to generate some discussion on the potential value of student learning outcomes as a part of making decisions about credit transfer. While ACAT is an advisory body, discussion of learning outcomes as a basis for transfer is happening nationally and internationally so we wanted to begin a similar, system-wide, conversation in Alberta. ACAT is also in the midst of a developing a new system to facilitate credit transfer, the Learner Pathways Modernization Initiative, and it therefore seemed an opportune time to explore the role of student learning outcomes and an alternative to course and program inputs.



Pre-Forum Survey

The organizing committee sent out a survey prior to the Forum to get a sense of the state of the play in Alberta post-secondary institutions around learning outcomes and some advice on what should come out of the Forum. There was a high response rate from institutions to the questionnaire and the results were quite encouraging. While Alberta institutions are at different stages in developing learning outcomes, most had implemented learning outcomes particularly at the course and program level. We also heard that learning outcomes were of little use without assessment and that this should be part of the discussion at the Forum. At the same time there was concern that assessment of learning outcomes did not become just an exercise but that it actually made a difference to student learning. Many thought that the Forum was also an opportunity to talk about the role of learning outcomes in program quality assurance and in assessing credit transfer. There were also requests to discuss incorporating learning outcomes at the institutional level in a way that reflected the institution's strategic mandate and values.

Pre-Forum Reading

The invitation to participants in the Forum included suggestions of reading on the subject of learning outcomes that would be useful preparation for the day. The list was as follows:

- Deller, F., Brumwell, S., & MacFarlane, A. (2015). *The Language of Learning Outcomes: Definitions and Assessments*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
- Goff, Lori et al. (n.d.). *Learning Outcomes Assessment: A Practitioner's Handbook*. Toronto: Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario
- FitzGibbon, John. (2014). *Learning Outcomes and Credit Transfer: Examples, Issues, and Possibilities*. Vancouver: British Columbia Council on Admissions and Transfer
- *Ensuring the Value of University Degrees in Ontario*. (n.d.). Toronto: Council of Ontario Universities
- Kennepohl, Dietmar K. (2016, forthcoming). "Incorporating Learning Outcomes in Transfer Credit: The Way Forward for Campus Alberta?" *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*

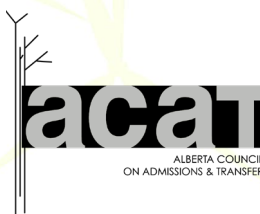
The Forum Program

With survey feedback in mind, the organizing committee developed the Forum program around three the themes of the why, the how and the assessment of learning outcomes. We chose three speakers to provide international, Canadian and Alberta perspectives on these three aspects of learning outcomes. They were:

TRUDY BANTA – Professor of Higher Education and Senior Advisor to the Chancellor for Planning and Institutional Improvement at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis,



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SANDY WELSH – Vice-Provost, Students, at the University of Toronto and Vice-Chair of the Appraisal Committee of the Ontario Universities Council on Quality Assurance,

JIM ZIMMER – Associate Vice-President of Teaching and Learning at Mount Royal University in Calgary.

The three speakers spoke at different times during the day and also came together as a panel with the addition of a student at the end of the day. We also maximized the time for table discussion and feedback through the day.

Trudy Banta spoke about how to develop learning outcomes and emphasized the need to define terms and understandings at the beginning of the process. She highlighted the importance of assessment and using the results of assessment to improve programs which will lead to a discussion of how learning happens. She provided examples of learning outcomes in a Nursing program and more generic outcomes general education based programs. She spoke to the value of learning outcomes in quality assurance. Finally she reminded us that all of this work around learning outcomes is in order to provide greater value to students.

Sandy Welsh spoke to the value of clear learning outcomes in creating and approving new programs and making changes to existing ones. Learning outcomes can make program more coherent and easier to evaluate. They are important in the external review of programs and those external reviews can provide the impetus to develop learning outcomes. Those who have to make decisions on the location of resources to programs will also find learning outcomes a basis for comparing need.

Jim Zimmer spoke about best practices in Alberta by drawing on Mount Royal University's many years of experience in developing learning outcomes. Based on practical experience he talked about the successes and challenges at Mount Royal and both the support and the push back that he experienced from faculty. Some key lessons learned from the Mount Royal experience were the importance of clear messaging and support from the senior administration, the need for resources, the key role of a faculty curriculum group, being clear about the role of the teaching and learning center and the desirability of beginning at the course and program level. Jim Zimmer followed up his presentation by chairing a panel of presenters from five different institutions in Alberta who talked about their experience with developing learning outcomes.

Assessment came up early in the discussion from the floor and Trudy Banta addressed it in a session in the afternoon. She emphasized that assessment should be about getting credible evidence on process and resources as well as the success of outcomes. The objective of assessment is to improve instruction, programs and services. There are various methods that can be used at various levels in the institution from immediate classroom assessment to developing rubrics to assess outcomes. Assessment, she noted, requires collaboration with faculty and it is also important to engage students. We also need to be evaluating the validity of our assessment methods.

Towards the end of the day the three main speakers, with the addition of a student representative, were brought back to reflect on the day and the conversations that had occurred. The speakers reminded us of the importance of engaging faculty in the process of developing and assessing learning outcomes. The value of learning outcomes and assessment to students can be a motivator for faculty. More than one of the speakers noted that the work on learning



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outcomes takes time and so they advised to start with small steps and let the process develop over time. They also thought that assessment can be simpler than it seems and not to make it over complicated. Attention was drawn to the important role of Quality Councils interacting with institutions to advance the learning outcomes agenda. The learning outcomes project needs to be a collaborative activity with institutions and it is important to have the conversations with all interest groups. At the same time we need to be mindful of the different cultures and contexts, both within and between institutions, that we are working in.

The student member of the final panel commented that students are not always aware of the work being done on learning outcomes and that post-secondary institutions are generally more familiar with assessment methods than learning outcomes and that the latter requires a real cultural change within institutions. She also felt that there had been more of a university than a polytechnical perspective through the discussions and reminded us of how curriculum changes at larger institutions can limit transfer when courses suddenly do not match and no notice is given.

The day concluded with the Forum co-chairs providing some reflections and indicating a few steps that we need as we move this agenda forward in Alberta.

Those wanting more detail, including the discussion that followed the presentations can go to the videos that cover the entire day and the presenters' power points.

Feedback on the Forum

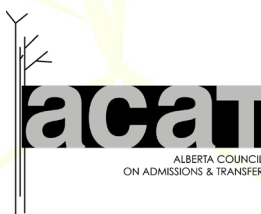
We asked for feedback on the Forum through a questionnaire at the end of the day and we received a lot of good and helpful response. Many felt that the day had been a success. Much of the feedback reflected the points that had been brought up during the day and clearly there is considerable appetite to move forward with this initiative in Alberta.

Some of the more significant points made about learning outcomes in Alberta in general were the importance of engaging faculty in the work and remembering that we are doing this in the interests of students. It was thought that we should find more ways to share best practices and perhaps there should be a portal to house ideas, documents and templates. A dictionary that defined standard descriptions was also suggested. Many were impressed with the amount of work already being done and wished to see it continue.

There were also helpful responses to a question about how learning outcomes could be used in development of course and program transfer in Alberta. Some responders noted, at a philosophical level, that Alberta institutions need to be more on the same page around transfer credit as it was believed that some were more open to granting credit than others. There is a feeling that we should do more to encourage institutions to use learning outcomes as the basis for transfer and that there should be more discussion of how to go about that. There needs to be clearer standards around learner pathways and some even suggested that learning outcomes should be made mandatory for transfer agreements.



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Next steps for ACAT

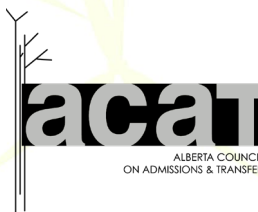
The objective for this forum was to have the system-wide conversation about learning outcomes and we believe that this objective was achieved. At the same time, other than the student comments at the end of the day, there was very little reference to the possible role of learning outcomes in the transfer system. So it is now important for ACAT to carry the conversation forward and connect it with the work that we are doing to improve learner pathways in Alberta.

There are a few ways in which we can advance this work:

- Given the call to engage faculty in this work we will raise the importance of learning outcomes in the articulation meetings and use an expanded version of our annual articulation chairs meeting to advance the system-wide conversation. We need to start planning this workshop for the spring on 2017 and seek resources to support it.
- The new Learner Pathways Modernization Initiative system will have a clear opportunity for outlining learning outcomes for courses and programs. The objective will be to encourage institutions to use the learning outcomes field as institutions develop new transfer agreements.
- There were suggestions that a resource that defines terms should be made available and so the new ARUCC-PCCAT National Transcript and Transfer Credit Guide should be posted on the ACAT website. The Guide is a first for Canada and provides resources, tools and best practice supports for postsecondary institutions and allied organizations that are seeking to enhance student mobility.
- Along with this report, we will place the videos of the Forum and the contributors' power point presentations on the ACAT website for the information of those in the Alberta system who want to carry the student learning outcomes agenda forward.



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