Accessibility to Post-secondary Education

Advanced Education

Report of the Auditor General

December 2025

Auditor
General
OF ALBERTA

Brandon Lunty, MLA
Chair
Standing Committee on Legislative Offices

On behalf of my office, I am transmitting the *Accessibility to Post-secondary Education Performance Audit* to the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Alberta, under the *Auditor General Act*.

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Auditor General of Alberta

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No Related Reports

Report Highlights

Why We Did This Audit

Alberta's post-secondary system (sector) is meant to be accessible to all Albertans. That means Albertans should be able to participate—regardless of where they live, what supports they need, or what barriers they face.

But many Albertans still face challenges that make it hard to continue their education after high school. These include living far from a campus, buildings that are hard to access, limited learning support, and not having the equipment or connectivity needed for remote or digital learning. Some also face personal challenges, such as disabilities that require accommodation or difficulty navigating the system. Others simply can't get in because there aren't enough seats in the programs they want.

What We Looked At

We looked at whether the Department of Advanced Education has effective processes to assess progress in meeting its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education.

We Found

The department does not:

- set measurable actions with targets for its post-secondary sector accessibility outcomes
- analyze how individual initiative results contribute to broader accessibility outcomes across the post-secondary sector
- report, internally or externally, how its accessibility initiatives are effectively and efficiently contributing to its accessibility desired outcomes.

The department is identifying accessibility barriers within individual programs and applying initiatives to mitigate them. But these results are not being analyzed to determine how they contribute to the desired accessibility outcomes. The department has not set clear measures of success to show whether accessibility efforts are working or whether resources are being used effectively and efficiently. It also does not report what its accessibility initiatives have achieved.

We Recommend

We recommend that the Department of Advanced Education improve its processes to:

- measure and analyze post-secondary sector accessibility results to assess progress, to identify lessons learned, and to inform future program decisions
- report—internally and externally—on progress toward its desired outcomes on making post-secondary education accessible to all Albertans

Why our Findings Matter to Albertans

If access to post-secondary education is limited, Albertans lose out on opportunities, and public funding may not reach those it is meant to support.

Albertans expect systems that are fair and transparent. Without clear processes to measure and report on sector accessibility, it's harder to improve the system and show that public money is being used effectively and efficiently to support those who want to learn and build their future.

Conclusion

We conclude, based on our audit criteria, that the Department of Advanced Education does not have effective processes to assess progress in meeting its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education, and that improvements can be made.

Background

Advanced Education oversees Alberta's post-secondary sector (sector) which includes public colleges and universities, private training schools, community-based learning programs, and First Nations colleges.

The department has committed to improving access to post-secondary education for all Albertans. This means removing barriers that are not about money. Management does not consider financial barriers part of accessibility, as that barrier falls under affordability. Accessibility barriers include buildings that are hard to access, inadequate learning support, limited access to technology, and not enough seats in high-demand programs. In addition, some people face personal challenges—such as disabilities that require accommodation or unfamiliarity with navigating the systems—that can affect their ability to participate and succeed.

Under Alberta's *Post-secondary Learning Act*, "an accessible system is one in which all Albertans are able to plan a career path and receive post-secondary education regardless of their location or barriers."

Launched in 2021, the *Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs* strategy outlines the government's commitment to improving access and student experience in the post-secondary sector. Its first goal is to ensure all Albertans have access to high-quality post-secondary opportunities and that the student experience is coordinated and integrated.

The Ministry of Advanced Education's 2023–2026 Business Plan reinforces this commitment through Outcome One: "Albertans have the education and skills required to secure rewarding careers in the current and future labour market, and to drive Alberta's economic growth and prosperity."

Alberta is a participant in the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. Through these partnerships, the department has access to detailed national data on post-secondary access. These national reports include trend analysis, demographic breakdowns, and narrative summaries that help explain who is accessing post-secondary education, how outcomes vary across groups, and where gaps remain in different Canadian jurisdictions.

In 2023–2024, over 240,000 domestic learners[1] were enrolled in approved programs at Alberta's publicly funded post-secondary institutions. The department supported more than 21,000 students with disabilities and almost 8,500 students attending foundational and skills development programs. Another 48,311 international students were enrolled in these institutions in 2023–2024.[2]

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[1] Domestic learners are not limited to individuals who are permanent residents of Alberta. It is defined as those with the following legal status values at some point during the academic year: Canadian, permanent resident, refugee, and unknown/not reported. These are all grouped as domestic, as all learners with these legal status values would be treated as residents regarding many matters such as loan eligibility, tuition, and fees. International students are not in this group as they are temporary residents who most often return to their home country at the conclusion of studies.

[2] International headcount enrolment, https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/system-wide-headcount-enrolment-within-the-alberta-post-secondary-education-system.

Detailed Findings and Recommendations

Improve Processes to Measure and Analyze Post-secondary Sector Accessibility Results

Context

To understand how accessibility to Alberta's post-secondary sector is managed, it helps to think about how all the parts work together. The department runs many initiatives aimed at reducing barriers for different groups of learners—such as those in rural areas, Indigenous communities, or adult upgrading. Initiatives refers to grant programs, targeted funding streams, department-led projects, and other non-academic efforts aimed at improving access to post-secondary education. But having many initiatives isn't the same as knowing whether the sector is becoming more accessible.

Think of Alberta's post-secondary sector like a hockey team. Each initiative is comparable to a player on the ice. One might focus on students with disabilities, another on rural learners, and another on foundational skills. These players may be doing good work individually, but without a coach overseeing how each player works together and what role they fulfill, it's hard to know how well the team is performing overall.

To lead effectively, a coach needs a game plan, a scoreboard, and to make adjustments quickly if things do not go as planned. In the same way, the department needs a clear strategy, sector performance measures, and a way to evaluate results. Without these, it cannot assess what's working, what needs to improve, or whether it's achieving its goal of making post-secondary education accessible to all Albertans at a reasonable cost.

Criteria

The department should have a process to analyze actual-to-planned results for accessibility measures, and to identify and apply lessons learned.

Our findings

Key findings

The department does not:

- set measurable actions with targets for its post-secondary sector accessibility outcomes
- analyze how individual initiative results contribute to broader accessibility outcomes across the post-secondary sector

Defining accessibility to post-secondary education is essential because it shapes how the department sets goals, tracks progress, and evaluates results. Without a clear definition of what success looks like, the department cannot measure whether its initiatives are improving access or working together effectively. Accessibility must be more than a broad principle; it needs defined outcomes, consistent data, and coordinated evaluation.

No measurable actions and targets for its sector accessibility outcomes

Management defines accessibility based on the definition of accessibility in the *Post-secondary Learning Act*: "a system in which all Albertans are able to plan a career path and receive post-secondary education regardless of their location or barriers."

While the *Post-secondary Learning Act* provides a broad outline of accessibility, the department has not defined what success looks like for the four accessibility components: planning a career path, receiving post-secondary education, access regardless of location, and access regardless of barriers. The department collects data related to accessibility initiatives, such as enrolment, participation, and

outcomes for specific student groups, but it has not set measures or targets to assess progress against the four accessibility components.

We see the department is improving accessibility in the sector; however, we do not know how significant that improvement is and how it will impact removing accessibility barriers in the future. For example, it has not defined how many students should be able to access programs close to home, or what level of participation would indicate that barriers are being reduced for specific groups. Without clear definitions of success and targets for each accessibility component, the department cannot assess whether its initiatives are effective and efficient in improving access.

The department told us they use accessibility information from its participation in the Pan-Canadian Education Indicators Program and the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada. This information can supplement information gathered from the department's initiatives and help with the development of measures, targets, and new initiatives. Management has no documentation of its analysis of this data and how it was utilized.

At the time of this report, the department is developing a suite of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) under Goal 1 of the Alberta 2030 Strategy. Some of these KPIs relate to accessibility. The department conducted research, consulted relevant business areas, and engaged with the Minister's Advisory Council on Higher Education and Skills for input on these KPIs. These KPIs have not yet been finalized or approved as the department has yet to establish consistent data sources, collection methods, or reporting guidelines for some indicators.

Accessibility is monitored through individual initiatives but not evaluated across the sector

The department gathers data on how individual initiatives are working, but does not assess which initiatives are working best to achieve the department's accessibility outcomes.

Individual initiatives may be improving accessibility, but the department doesn't know which actions are the most effective overall, and thus where they can efficiently reduce or remove significant barriers.

Individual initiatives to improve accessibility include:

- promoting skilled trades through awareness initiatives
- improving access to career planning tools like Skill Up
- expanding seats in high-demand areas such as aviation, mental health, and technology
- funding foundational learning across Alberta, including rural and remote communities
- providing targeted funding to reduce barriers for under-represented groups, including Indigenous learners and students with disabilities

The department uses initiative-level data reported by post-secondary institutions to identify gaps and monitor progress. For example, six of the nine institutions participating in the health care aide seat expansion initiative reported declining enrolment and identified contributing factors such as admission requirements and student interest. While this shows attention to emerging issues within a single initiative, we found no process to apply lessons learned across initiatives to improve sector accessibility.

NEW Recommendation:
Improve processes to analyze post-secondary accessibility measures

We recommend that the Department of Advanced Education improve its processes to measure and analyze the post-secondary sector accessibility results to assess progress, to identify lessons learned, and to inform future decisions.

CONSEQUENCES OF NOT TAKING ACTION

Without a process to assess overall progress toward its accessibility objectives, the department cannot evaluate whether access to post-secondary education is improving across the sector. Complete measures and targets are needed to assess progress, identify what's working, and apply lessons learned. Without them, the department may continue investing in initiatives without knowing which ones reduce the most significant barriers. This increases the risk that some Albertans remain underserved.

Improve Post-secondary Sector Accessibility Reporting

Context

Reporting is like watching the hockey coach provide a post-game analysis to the media and fans. It's not just about describing what happened. It's about describing how that compared to what was planned, what worked, and where improvements are needed. For the Department of Advanced Education, accessibility reporting should show how efforts are adding up, who is benefiting, how much it is costing, and where to focus next. Without a complete picture, it's difficult for the department to show where its efforts have been effective and efficient, and to make informed decisions about what's needed moving forward.

Criteria

The department should have a process to report—internally and externally—progress on achieving its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education.

Our findings

Key findings

The department does not report, internally or externally, how its accessibility initiatives are effectively and efficiently contributing to its accessibility desired outcomes.

External reporting

The department's annual report is the main source of public reporting on achievements related to accessibility.

The 2023–2024 report includes one measure and one indicator to assess sector accessibility:

- Measure: total domestic learners enrolled in approved programs at publicly funded post-secondary institutions with a target of 222,523+ in the 2023-2026 business plan.

- Indicator: the number of learners receiving funding through the Foundational Learning Assistance Program.

The department does not provide sufficient analysis to help interpret the results. The measure and indicator do not clearly explain whether the objective of improving access has been achieved. For example, the report does not cite how many learners who benefited from the Foundation Learning Assistance Program have pursued post-secondary education or found employment.[3]

The annual report also includes narrative descriptions of accessibility-related activities such as seat expansions, rural programming, and targeted supports for under-represented groups. Many of these align with Goal 1 of the Alberta 2030 strategy, which focuses on improving access to post-secondary education. However, it does not explain how these activities contribute to the department's accessibility desired outcomes being achieved.

Management told us that other reports are also available, including updates on Alberta 2030 implementation, and student mobility reports. While these reports may contain relevant information, they are not clearly linked to accessibility outcomes.

Internal reporting

Internally, the department receives reporting through grant agreements and program-specific initiatives. These include data on seat increases, enrolments, completions, demographic information, and financials. This information is collected across a range of targeted initiatives, including enrolment expansions, micro-credential pilots,[4] and sector-specific programming.

While internal reporting may support some level of initiative-level achievement, it is not compiled or presented in a way that shows the cumulative impact of these efforts across the post-secondary sector. Without a documented process or consolidated analysis, the department risks failing to identify which accessibility initiatives are most effective, where gaps exist, and whether its efforts are equitably serving Albertans.

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[3] Under the *Ministry Annual Report Standards* issued by Alberta Treasury Board and Finance, ministries should *analyze the relationship between investments and activities, results and outcomes achieved.*

[4] Micro-credential pilots are short, focused training programs developed in partnership with industry to help Albertans quickly gain job-related skills in high-demand and emerging sectors. The department launched a pilot in 2021-22 with 56 programs across 19 institutions to support rapid upskilling and re-skilling, especially for unemployed and under-employed Albertans.

We recommend that the Department of Advanced Education improve its processes to report—internally and externally—on progress toward its desired outcomes on making post-secondary education accessible to all Albertans.

CONSEQUENCES OF NOT TAKING ACTION

Without a better reporting process, the department may miss important trends, gaps, or barriers that affect students. This limits transparency, weakens accountability, and makes it harder to show Albertans whether progress is being made.

About This Audit

Objective and Scope

The objective of our audit was to determine whether the Department of Advanced Education has effective processes to assess progress in meeting its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education.

Our audit covered the department's processes for monitoring and reporting on its progress in meeting its desired outcomes on an accessible post-secondary education system. We examined processes in place from April 1, 2023 to March 31, 2024. We:

- examined legislation, policies, procedures, and other relevant documentation
- interviewed key staff and reviewed documents to understand the department's processes to assess and report on its goal of making post-secondary education accessible

Criteria

To determine whether the department has processes to assess progress in meeting its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education, we used the following criteria:

- The department should have a process to analyze actual-to-planned results for accessibility measures, and to identify and apply lessons learned.
- The department should have processes to report—internally and externally—progress on achieving its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education.

We established the criteria based on the Public Sector Accounting Board's issued Statement of Recommended Practice 2—Public Performance Reporting—Measuring, Monitoring, and Assessing Results and Ministry Annual Report Standards 2023-24.

Management of the Department of Advanced Education acknowledged the suitability of the audit criteria on August 30, 2024.

Audit Responsibilities and Quality Assurance Statement

Management of the Department of Advanced Education is responsible for ensuring the post-secondary education system is accessible.

> **Our responsibility is to express an independent conclusion on whether the department has processes to assess progress in meeting its desired outcomes on accessible post-secondary education and to report on its progress.**

We performed all the work in this audit to a reasonable level of assurance in accordance with the Canadian Standard on Assurance Engagements (CSAE) 3001—Direct Engagements, set out in the CPA Canada Handbook— Assurance. We apply Canadian Standard on Quality Management 1, which requires us to design, implement and operate a system of quality management, including policies and procedures regarding compliance with ethical requirements, professional standards, and applicable legal and regulatory requirements. We comply with the independence and other ethical requirements of the Chartered Professional Accountants of Alberta Rules of Professional Conduct, which are founded on fundamental principles of integrity and due care, objectivity, professional competence, confidentiality, and professional behaviour.

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