

Guidelines:

Suspensions

These guidelines offer advice and identify considerations in support of the development of comprehensive proposals for suspension of a program or a specialization (major) within a program.

The *Programs of Study Regulation* stipulates that the Minister's approval is required for a post-secondary institution to suspend an approved program of study.

The ministry reviews proposals to ensure that system offerings remain reflective of the needs and interests of current and prospective students and in alignment with institutional mandates and Campus Alberta priorities.

The ministry requires institutions to seek approval for suspensions of ministry-approved programs or specializations since such suspensions represent a shift in system offerings.

Suspension approvals also ensure that institutional offerings remain aligned with the Provider and Program Registry System (PAPRS), on which many ministry departments (e.g., Alberta Student Aid) and reporting system (e.g., LERS, ASI, and PFD) depend for their operations.

Program suspensions are normal and necessary. Institutions need to monitor their program offerings and periodically refresh them. This process is part of the natural life cycle of programming at an institution.

Scope

All categories of ministry-approved programming fall under the requirement for institutions to request ministry authorization for program suspension, including:

- non-credentials;
- certificates;
- diplomas;
- applied degrees; and
- degrees.

Institutions typically propose a suspension to a program in instances where they wish to entirely close admissions into a program for purposes of significant curriculum revision or in anticipation of terminating a program due to various contingencies.

Guiding Principles

- Advance planning and transparent communications are important underpinnings of effective program suspension decision-making.
- Consultation processes are key to effective planning and implementation.
- Proposed program suspensions should be supported by appropriate rationales as they have potential impacts for enrolled students, faculty, and staff as well as for the Alberta post-secondary sector and employers.
- Suspensions are not ends in themselves; they are part of a larger academic planning process leading to either a program reactivation or termination.
- Programming changes should align with the institution's mandate and role within the Campus Alberta system and should not expose to risk the institution's ability to carry out that mandate.
- Commitments made to active students should be honoured, with necessary supports put in place to enable student success during the program suspension period.
- Reasonable accommodations should be made for stop-out students to enable them to reach their educational goals.

Comprehensive and Integrated Planning

Suspension proposals can be complex and typically require institutions to formulate plans detailing:

- the management and mitigation of system and institutional risks;
- assistance provided to students to help them progress and be successful during periods of program suspension; and
- an internal process for monitoring suspended programs and tracking progress and outcomes for impacted students.

The ministry expects that proposed suspensions are part of a broader strategic programming plan and, as such, are reflected in the Comprehensive Institutional Plans that institutions submit annually to the ministry. Nevertheless, the ministry understands that there will be cases in which circumstances necessitate changes in programming not identified previously; however, these instances should be relatively infrequent.

Institutions should consult with the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) in cases where a degree program was previously reviewed and recommended by CAQC.

In the event that an institution proposes to suspend a program at the end of one academic year and immediately replace it with a new program at the start of the following academic year, suspension and new program proposals should be coordinated in consultation with the ministry.

Need for Suspension

Institutions do not need to submit a suspension proposal in the following circumstances:

- If an institution is choosing not to offer a program for a relatively short period of time (typically less than two years in duration) but intends to offer the program in near future.
- If institution delivers multiple offerings at different locations or has multiple cohort intakes throughout the year and is only choosing to suspend some of these offerings.

Institutions do not need to submit a suspension proposal prior to submitting a proposal to terminate a program if:

- there are no current students remaining in the program; and
- adequate plans have been made for stop-out students.

In all other situations involving closure of a program to new admissions, institutions are required to submit a suspension proposal to the ministry for approval.

Definitions

Suspension: a complete but temporary closure of a program to new admissions and registrations while the institution continues delivering the program of study to current students and issuing parchments to graduates.

Active student: a student currently enrolled in the program of study, including a student on an institutionally approved leave of absence from the program or an applicant who has accepted an admission offer.

Stop-out student: a student who is not an active student as defined by an institution's admission policy, but who has previously enrolled in the program and may be planning on returning to the program at a later date.

Suspension Proposal Considerations

- Comprehensive and Integrated Planning
- Need for Suspension
- Timeline Considerations
- Formulating a Rationale
- Assessing Institution and System Impacts
- Consultations and Internal Approvals
- Student Support and Learner Access
- Closure of Program to Admissions
- Communicating the Program Change
- Extending a Suspension

Timeline Considerations

Proposal Submission Timelines

Institutions should submit suspension proposals at least six months in advance of the proposed start of the suspension period. Failure to submit a timely proposal may result in the proposed suspension being deferred to the start of the following academic year (see *Guidelines: Proposal Timelines* for detailed information).

Institutions should submit suspension proposals with a start date of July 1 to align with system wide protocols. In special cases where circumstances warrant, alternate start dates can be accommodated.

The department uses June 30 as the standard end date for program suspensions.

Suspension Duration Timelines

The duration of a suspension should be set by an institution in such a way so as to:

- enable students to complete the program requirements; and
- provide sufficient time to restructure the program of study, when applicable.

In order to gauge the appropriate duration needed by active students (both full-time and part-time) to complete requirements, institutions should take into account:

- the number of student currently enrolled in the program;
- the length of the program and mode of delivery considerations;
- institutional policies and program regulations;
- the stage/year of the program in which students are engaged;
- whether there are similar or related programs/specializations into which students could transfer; and
- whether there are constraints related to course currency, faculty availability, etc.

In order to allow adequate time for program redevelopment, the institution should develop an outline of the work necessary to complete this restructuring, taking into account the time needed for:

- internal research and meetings;
- stakeholder consultations (if applicable);
- curriculum development and program planning; and
- review and approval(s) by internal bodies.

Suspension period durations generally fall within the below ranges, although practices vary across institutions and disciplines:

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| • Certificates | 1 – 3 years |
| • Diplomas | 2 – 4 years |
| • Undergraduate Degrees and Applied Degrees | 3 – 6 years |
| • Graduate Degrees | 2 – 5 years |

Institutions should explain how they established the suspension period duration in the suspension proposal.

Institutions may submit reactivation and termination proposals earlier than the suspension end dates under specific conditions. Institutions that wish to do so should consult with the department prior to submitting a proposal.

Formulating a Rationale

Institutions should provide compelling evidence and a data-based rationale for requesting a suspension. The rationale(s) provided for the suspension should align with the ultimate plan for the program in terms of reactivation or termination.

There are many possible rationales for an institution to request a suspension, including (but not limited to):

- changing labour market considerations;
- modifications in regulatory requirements for a program;
- changes in legislative requirements (including those pending proclamation);
- financial or other resource constraints;
- substantive changes/redirection in a field of study;
- recommendation from a quality assurance review;
- negative assessment of program quality; and
- shifting provincial priorities.

While low-enrolment demonstrates a lack of learner demand for a program, such circumstances should be further contextualized since chronically low enrolment for a program is only a symptom of a larger systemic issue. In these situations, the ministry expects institutions will have investigated and identified possible causes of this lack of demand before proposing a suspension.

If possible, institutions should have also made good-faith attempts at addressing the underlying issue causing the low enrolment before proposing a suspension; however, the ministry understands that such actions may not always be feasible given the competing priorities and fiscal challenges that institutions face.

In cases of programs being proposed for suspension due to budgetary considerations, the proposal should address the following questions:

- What are the enrolment and graduation numbers for the past five years?
- What is the likely impact of the proposed change on current and potential future students?
- Is there market demand for students with this education that will not be met in the absence of this program?
- To what extent have there been efforts to resolve the budgetary situation and allow the program to continue?
- Has potential collaboration (with other units internally or with other programs externally) been explored?

When documenting a rationale in suspension proposals, sufficient detail and evidence should be provided so that governance committees and department reviewers can understand the situation.

Assessing Institution and System Impacts

Post-Secondary System Impacts

Institutions should make reasonable attempts to identify larger system accessibility impacts resulting from this proposed program suspension, particularly the impact of this suspension on:

- learner pathways within the Campus Alberta system;
- educational opportunities for the communities that the institution serves; and
- potential impacts on specific programs at other institutions.

In cases where potential impacts on programs at other institutions are identified, the specific programs should be named and potential impacts described. (For example, in some cases programs may experience greater or fewer applications, or may need to alter or revise transfer information.)

If this program serves an important or unique need (academic, social, or economic) within the Campus Alberta system, or in the region(s) that the institution serves, and/or if this program is unique in the Campus Alberta system, institutions should show evidence of consultation with other institutions and key stakeholders regarding the proposed programming change. Consultation with other institutions is intended to facilitate transferral of programs and/or students or collaboration on delivery to optimize efficiencies for all partners.

In some circumstances, the department may participate in discussions with the institution and work with stakeholders in the system to find alternate solutions to a program suspension such as a program transfer. Whenever possible, the department wishes to have unique or one-of-a-kind programs remain available to Albertans, although each proposal needs to be considered on its own merits.

Institution Impacts

Institutions should show how they have adequately and appropriately considered the consequences of a proposed suspension decision on their operations.

Institutions should attempt to identify other programs that they offer which the program suspension may affect. For example, the institution should identify:

- programs into which graduates ladder;
- programs from which graduates ladder;
- related programs involving service courses or which share faculty or resources; and
- similar programs to which prospective student may apply during the suspension.

Institutions should ensure that these affected programs remain sustainable and should identify ways of mitigating potential risks to these programs stemming from the proposed suspension.

Institutions should also identify resource re-allocations resulting from the suspension of a program, particularly those which impact system and institutional capacities. In particular, institutions should identify:

- any staffing implications (including collective agreement matters) related to the proposed suspension;
- reallocation of classroom, lab, and other physical space as a result of the proposed suspension; and
- reallocation of the operating budget of the program during the proposed term of the suspension.

Since program suspensions represent a shift in both system and institutional resources, these reallocations should be reflective of the institution's broader priorities as reflected in Comprehensive Institutional Plans.

If the program proposed for suspension is being delivered collaboratively with another institution and/or at another institution's campus, the institution proposing the suspension should provide details regarding discussions and arrangements concluded with the partnering institution(s).

Consultations and Internal Approvals

Consultations

Because circumstances vary significantly concerning suspension proposals, institutions should use a variety of strategies when consulting with key constituencies, as appropriate. Documentation of concurrence or support by affected stakeholders is an important strategy for demonstrating that the proposal is sound. In most cases, institutions will consult with:

- advisory committees;
- students; and
- faculty and staff.

Depending on the kind of program and specific circumstances of the proposal, institutions may also need to document consultations undertaken with:

- regulatory, accreditation, and quality assurance bodies;
- professional and industry associations; and
- employers.

When appropriate, institutions should provide information about the kinds of consultations that occurred, dates of the consultations and a summary of the feedback received. Attaching relevant documentation such as meeting minutes or survey results is also useful.

Internal Approvals

Institutions should conduct an internal proposal review and approval process in compliance with their own institutional policies and governance committee mandates prior to submitting a suspension proposal to the ministry. Typically, this process begins with program evaluation or strategic planning initiatives, with a proposal proceeding through the required internal approval bodies.

As part of the suspension proposal, institutions should demonstrate that they have obtained the required internal approval for the proposed suspension by identifying the approval body or administrator and the date of approval.

In the process of planning for a program suspension, institutions should also consult with institutional colleagues in related programs in order to both gain their input and advise them of possible programming changes affecting them.

Student Support and Learner Access

Active Students

In its suspension proposal, the ministry expects institutions to demonstrate that they have made reasonable and appropriate accommodations to allow current students to complete their programs of study during the period of suspension, including:

- offering required courses with appropriate instructors to enable students to graduate within the suspension period;
- contingency plans in the event that students need to retake a course or otherwise miss an initial opportunity to complete a program requirement; and
- identification of similar institutional programs or programs at other institutions, into which students could potentially transfer, if they wish.

Institutions should develop teach-out plans to support active students completing their programs within the duration of the program suspension. The teach-out plan should convey how program quality will be maintained and demonstrate how the institution plans to support students with courses/labs, advising, and other services as they complete the program.

Stop-out Students

Institutions should make efforts, as appropriate and reasonable, to identify stop-out students who are likely to return during the program suspension period (i.e., students who very recently left the program or were required to withdraw temporarily for academic reasons).

It may not be possible or appropriate for an institution to accommodate every stop-out student. Nonetheless, the ministry expects that institutions have plans addressing how students returning after a break in their studies, or would-be applicants, would be accommodated. These accommodations include identifying:

- similar programs at the institution, into which a stop-out student could transfer and/or receive credit for prior learning;
- programs at other institutions within the region into which a stop-out student could transfer and/or receive credit for prior learning;
- online programs at recognized Alberta or Canadian institutions into which a stop-out student could transfer and potentially receive credit for prior learning; and
- whether and/or under what circumstances a stop-out student could be re-enrolled in a program targeted for suspension.

Prospective Students

Efforts should be made to inform prospective students that their program of interest is no longer available, when feasible, and to explain to them what other program options are available.

Sufficient advance notice should be given so that prospective students are not making educational decisions based on a program that may become unavailable to them.

Closure of Program to Admissions

Institutions may close admissions to a program once they have submitted a suspension proposal to the ministry.

In advance of such a closure, institutions may wish to discourage students from applying to a program slated for suspension (e.g., by explaining to prospective students that the institution is planning on suspending the program and by identifying similar programs at their institution or at other institutions), since doing so can increase institutional risk and create the need for longer duration suspension periods

Prior to this, however, a program should remain open to admissions during the normal registration and admission cycles for that program.

In certain circumstances (a lack of instructors available to teach program courses, for example), institutions may be forced to close a program to new admission before submitting a suspension proposal to the ministry. In such cases, institutions should contact the department and endeavour to submit a suspension proposal to the ministry as soon as it is possible. In the proposal, institutions should explain the reason(s) that necessitated this sudden and premature closure of the program to admissions.

Communicating the Programming Change

Institutions should develop a communications plan so that stakeholders are appropriately advised of the suspension. Institutions should follow their internal policies and practices concerning website notices, calendar information updates, and key institutional planning documents.

This plan should involve formal communications with active and stop-out students. Such communication is typically managed by the Office of the Registrar or the appropriate Dean.

In some circumstances, it may be prudent to advise potential applicants that a program is slated for suspension in advance of approval for the ministry to allow learners to make informed decisions about their educational futures.

Extending a Suspension

In some cases, institutions may want to propose an extension to a previously approved and still active suspension period. Most often, institutions make these requests to allow further time for students to complete the program or to redevelop program curriculum in advance of reactivating the program.

The advice provided in this document about planning for a program suspensions remains applicable in these situations.

In order to extend a suspension period, institutions must submit an extension suspension proposal in PAPRS.

Further Information and Assistance

For additional information contact:

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Related Guidelines:

- Reactivations
- Terminations
- Proposal Timelines

Other related documents:

- 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.