

AQIP PATHWAY ACTION PROJECTS

A Resource for Institutions and Peer Reviewers

Institutions on the AQIP Pathway are required to conduct short-term quality improvement projects. These Action Projects create a foundation for an institution's improvement initiatives and help it work toward building a culture of continuous quality improvement.

Benefits of Action Projects

Action Projects help institutions to begin or build on their existing quality improvement efforts. Through their projects, institutions engage faculty and staff in the selection of improvement efforts and develop the structures necessary to implement larger improvement projects. Action Projects also provide an opportunity for faculty and staff to develop a common understanding of the institution's current processes and performance, which will be the benchmark for future improvement efforts.

Action Project Requirements

Institutions are free to declare and pursue as many Action Projects as they wish, within the following guidelines:

- Institutions must have at least one active project at all times.
- Institutions must submit one Action Project Update for peer review through HLC's online Action Project Network each academic year.
- At least every other year, institutions must position or align the project they submit for review with AQIP Pathway Category 1 (Helping Students Learn).
- Projects should be designed to last 12–24 months.

Developing Action Projects

Action Projects are identified, designed and initiated by each institution to suit its needs. In designing Action Projects, an institution can examine new opportunities or it can target existing systems and processes for improvement.

To develop valuable Action Projects, an institution should search for challenges and opportunities that:

- Make a serious and visible difference to institutional performance.
- Embody challenging but attainable goals.
- Stretch the institution in new ways to learn and excel.
- Focus on both efficiency and benefits to students and other stakeholders.

Creating an Action Project Charter

Although it is not required, many institutions have discovered that creating a formal charter for an Action Project enhances the likelihood of its success. Chartering involves four steps:

1. Prepare a proposed Action Project Charter that includes the following elements:
 - Project title
 - Project origins and purpose
 - Description of the problem the institution is trying to solve, or the opportunity it is trying to leverage
 - Key project stakeholders

- Summary of the project's vision, objectives and scope
 - Budget and timeline
 - Constraints on the project and team
 - Assumptions upon which the project is based
 - Critical success factors and risks
 - The strategies, tools and techniques the team will employ
 - Team members' roles and responsibilities
2. Review the charter with the administrator in charge of the area related to the Action Project to confirm support. It is important that the administrator agree with the project's goals and supports trying or piloting the solution the team proposes.
 3. Prepare a detailed process map of the areas of the process where measurement will be focused initially.
 4. Form the Action Project team and get to work.

Setting an Action Project Timetable

An Action Project should last as long as it takes to achieve its goals. Much of the value derived from an Action Project is learning how to identify and solve a problem quickly. Doing so often results in better and more creative solutions, communicates a higher level of energy and enthusiasm to the rest of the institution, and helps an institution's employees develop knowledge and skills that will serve them well in other challenging situations.

AQIP Pathway Strategy Forums

The AQIP Pathway cycle includes two workshops, called Strategy Forums, that are designed to help institutions develop new Action Projects. Institutions are required to attend a Strategy Forum during Years 1–2 and Years 5–6 of the pathway cycle. The event provides opportunities for institutional teams to give and receive constructive feedback on their quality systems, as well as input on specific projects that may evolve into formal Action Projects.

Action Project Network

The [Action Project Network](#) is an online tool for institutions to submit information about their projects to HLC for review. For each Action Project an institution pursues, it will use the network to create and submit a

Project Declaration, one or more Action Project Updates, and a final Concluding Report. The network is also a collaborative space where users can learn about other institutions' projects and track their progress.

Instructions on using the network are provided in the [user manual](#) and [training webinar](#).

Declaring an Action Project

An institution enters an Action Project in the network by completing the project declaration form. The declaration is not reviewed by HLC staff or peer reviewers, but it is required in order to later submit an Action Project Update. In its declaration, the institution must provide the following information:

- Planned kickoff date
- Target completion date
- Project title
- Project goal
- Related AQIP Pathway Category
- Motivation for pursuing the project
- Organizational areas affected by the project
- Organizational processes or activities changed or improved by the project
- Rationale for the project timeline
- Plans to publicize and monitor project efforts
- Outcome measures or indicators to determine project's impact

Action Project Updates and Reviews

An Action Project Update is a report submitted through the network that describes an institution's progress on a project, including any challenges it has encountered and any successes or discoveries it has made. The update is evaluated by an HLC peer reviewer, who provides feedback and guidance on advancing the project.

The institution should view the Action Project Update process as an opportunity to identify areas where it wants to solicit objective input that will be useful as each project is carried forward. The process is designed to help the institution stay on course to accomplish the goals it has set for itself.

Submission Cycles

There are three cycles per academic year when Action Project Updates and Reviews occur:

- Update submission period: October 1–November 30
Review due date: December 31
- Update submission period: February 1–March 31
Review due date: April 30
- Update submission period: June 1–July 31
Review due date: August 31

Prior to the beginning of the academic year, HLC will assign each institution one of the three cycles for submitting their Action Project Update. These assignments will take into account the institution's preferred cycle, but will also be based on peer reviewer availability and other factors.

Action Project Update

Submission Process

An institution must email aqip@hlcommission.org to inform HLC which Action Project they plan to submit for review before the start of their assigned submission cycle. HLC staff will then assign that project to the cycle in the Action Project Network. Institutions may report on a new project or submit an update on an ongoing project.

The institution's Action Project team members must complete and submit the update in the Action Project Network. Team members may access and complete the Action Project Update questions at any point, but the update may only be submitted during the institution's assigned cycle.

Update Questions

Institutions must answer the following questions in their Action Project Updates. Responses should be direct and factual to provide a clear picture of the institution's progress, accomplishments and challenges related to its Action Project.

1. **Current Action Project Status Summary**
Briefly describe the current status of the Action Project. Explain how this project relates to any strategic initiatives or challenges described in the institution's most recent Systems Portfolio.
2. **Original Action Project Goals and Deliverables**
List the Action Project goals as stated in the original

project declaration, along with the metrics or measures for assessing the progress for each goal.

3. **Accomplishments During the Past Year**
Describe what has been accomplished with this project during the past year, specifically referring to quantifiable results. If applicable, discuss how the original goals and anticipated outcomes have shifted during the year.
4. **Institutional Involvement**
Describe how various members of the learning community have participated in this Action Project. Show the breadth of involvement by individuals and groups over the project's duration, particularly during the past year.
5. **Effective Practices**
Describe the effect that this Action Project has had on the institution, students and others in the learning community. What good practice has the institution learned that can be used in other aspects of its quality work or from which other institutions might benefit?
6. **Anticipated Challenges to Project Success**
Describe the anticipated challenges that may be encountered in successfully completing the project or for institutionalizing the learning from the project's goals.
7. **Planned Next Steps and Timeline**
In light of the Action Project goals, current circumstances, institutional learning from this project, and anticipated barriers to success, list the next steps to be taken over the course of the next 12–24 months in order to complete or institutionalize the results of this Action Project. Provide a timeline for completing each next step.
8. **Additional Information, Questions or Concerns**
Provide any additional information, inquires or concerns that the institution wishes for reviewers to consider regarding this Action Project.

Action Project Reviews

Review Process

An institution's Action Project Update is evaluated by an HLC peer reviewer in the network. The peer reviewer evaluates and provides recommendations on project

development and execution, and suggests factors to consider for project success. The peer reviewer's main concern is whether the institution shows good faith in its pursuit of continuous quality improvement by demonstrating objective progress through its Action Project.

After the peer reviewer has completed the initial evaluation, the review is sent to an Action Project Mentor. The mentor provides the reviewer with guidance and directions on completing the Action Project Review. The mentor may also provide additional feedback for the institution as needed.

Review Questions

Peer reviewers must answer the following questions in their Action Project Review:

1. Please comment on anything that is omitted or incomplete in the project status, dates and summary field.
2. Check for accuracy and completeness against the original Project Declaration. Are the right metrics or measures included for each goal? If not, what revisions to the metrics/measures would you suggest that the institution consider?
3. Has the institution acted in meaningful ways to pursue project success, making progress as anticipated in the original project declaration? If meaningful progress or project success has not been achieved, has the institution made appropriate revisions to the goals or anticipated outcomes for this project?
 - Are descriptions of resources, organization, concrete results, and reaching milestones included?
 - Make a statement of global judgment (e.g., "The institution is making [excellent/good/acceptable/slow/no] progress in this Action Project").
4. Are the appropriate people involved sufficiently for the nature and scope of the project?
5. Does the institution show evidence of learning from what it did well?
 - Acknowledge any practice that could be replicated internally in future projects.
 - Encourage the sharing of best practices with other institutions.

6. Does the institution have a realistic understanding of what it needs to address in order to achieve progress and, ultimately, project success? Does it assess its internal and external environments, recognizing the potential forces that could hinder success? Is anything overlooked?
7. Does the institution understand the current status of its project and know how it intends to pursue project success?
8. Overall, does the institution demonstrate a good faith effort in its pursuit of continuous quality improvement through this Action Project? Is there anything of concern that should be brought to the attention of HLC?

Concluding Reports and Reviews

When an institution completes an Action Project, it is required to complete a Concluding Report in the network. The report is evaluated by an HLC peer reviewer, who provides feedback on the institution's efforts.

Concluding Report

An institution must email aqip@hlcommission.org when it has completed an Action Project. HLC staff will mark the project as closed in the network, which will give the institution access to the Concluding Report questions for that project. The institution's Action Project team members must complete and submit the Concluding Report in the network.

Team members must answer the following questions in the Concluding Report:

- What is the primary reason for closing this project?
- What aspects of this project would you categorize as successful?
- What aspects of this project would you categorize as less than successful?

Concluding Review

The Concluding Report is evaluated by an Action Project Mentor in the network. The mentor provides any final thoughts or feedback related to the project.

Using Peer Reviewer Feedback

When an Action Project Review or Concluding Review is submitted in the network, it is immediately made available to the institution. The institution's team leader will receive a notification that it is available. Institutions are encouraged to consider the peer reviewer's feedback in continuing or starting new Action Projects and preparing for its next Strategy Forum. The feedback may also be helpful as the institution prepares for its next Systems Portfolio.

Additional Resources

[Action Project Network Login](#)

[Action Project Resources](#)

[AQIP Pathway Overview](#)

Questions?

Contact aqip@hlcommission.org