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AN EMERGING ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM – IMPACT RIPPLE EFFECTS :

A retrospective realist impact case study
of the Regional Innovation Network
of Southern Alberta (RINSA), 2011–2021

July 2022
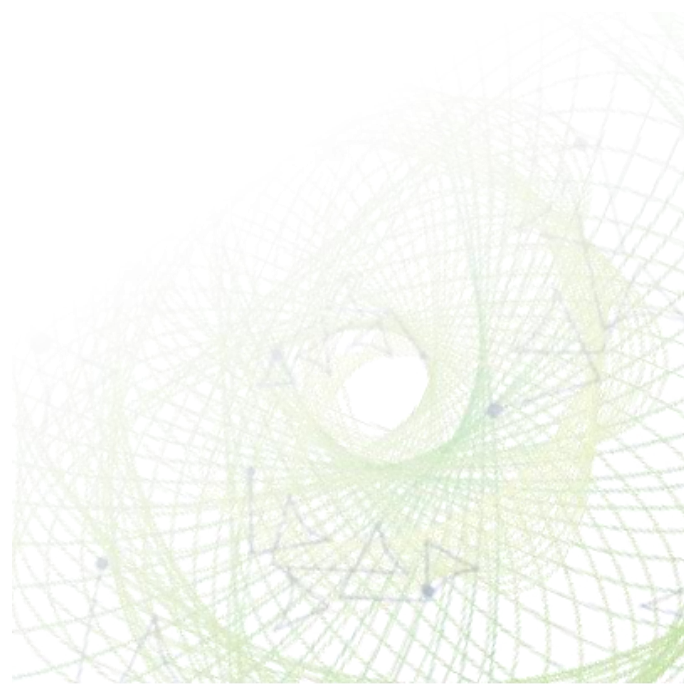*Prepared by Dr. Jonathan Grant for Alberta Innovates*

An Emerging Entrepreneurial Ecosystem – Impact Ripple Effects:

A retrospective realist impact case study of the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA), 2011–2021

About the Lead Author

Jonathan Grant is founding Director of Different Angles Ltd, a consultancy that focuses on the social impact of universities and research. His main interests are in biomedical and health R&D policy, research impact assessment, the use of research and evidence in policy and decision-taking, and the social purpose of universities in the 21st century. Jonathan has significant international experience, having helped formulate and implement R&D and other strategies in, for example, the United Kingdom, Greece, Norway, Qatar, Oman, Abu Dhabi, Australia, Canada and the United States. Jonathan's book, *The New Power University: The social purpose of higher education in the 21st century*, was published by Pearson in March 2021.

About the Impact Action Lab (IAL)

The Impact Action Lab, at Alberta Innovates, partners with ecosystem players to amplify and activate the collective economic and societal impact of research and innovation investments. The IAL is made up of global and local impact experts that help move ideas to actionable insights. We are creative in iterating fit-for-purpose approaches to effect real change and scale impact. The IAL works with organizations to enhance their capacity by incorporating performance and impact management systems to demonstrate their value and generate benefits to their communities.

About Regional Innovation Networks (RINs)

Regional Innovation Networks are entrepreneur-centric, community-based networks with the goal of providing programs and services to accelerate growth of technology and knowledge-based businesses in those jurisdictions. Each Regional Innovation Network such as the RINSA is made up of like-minded public organizations. They're passionate about helping small technology and knowledge-based businesses innovate and grow, diversifying the economy and helping build a strong entrepreneurial culture in Alberta.

About this Report

This report was commissioned by the IAL in collaboration with the Entrepreneurial Investments business unit at Alberta Innovates to understand RINSA's contribution to (hidden) impact as well as understand lessons learned and actionable insights for RINs on a go forward basis. To do this a realist impact case study approach was taken to understand what works, what doesn't, under what conditions, and how to make enhancements in the future.

Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This report describes a retrospective realist impact case study (ICS) of the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA). RINSA is funded by Alberta Innovates and is one of eight Regional Innovation Networks (RINs) that aim to create and support a vibrant 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' in the province of Alberta Canada. Covering a 10-year period, since RINSA's inception in 2011, the ICS describes the context for the founding of RINSA and how that has changed over the past decade, the activities (or mechanisms) that RINSA adopted to stimulate and support entrepreneurship and the impact (or outcomes) of those activities. As summarized in Figure A, the interaction of these three domains is critical to understanding what worked for whom and in what circumstances. In adopting a 'realist' approach it is possible to have a more nuanced understanding of how the network evolved over time, realigning its ways of working, addressing systemic issues around equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), developing new approaches and interventions, and constantly adapting to the changing challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure A: Overall schematic of the retrospective impact case study (ICS) of the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA)
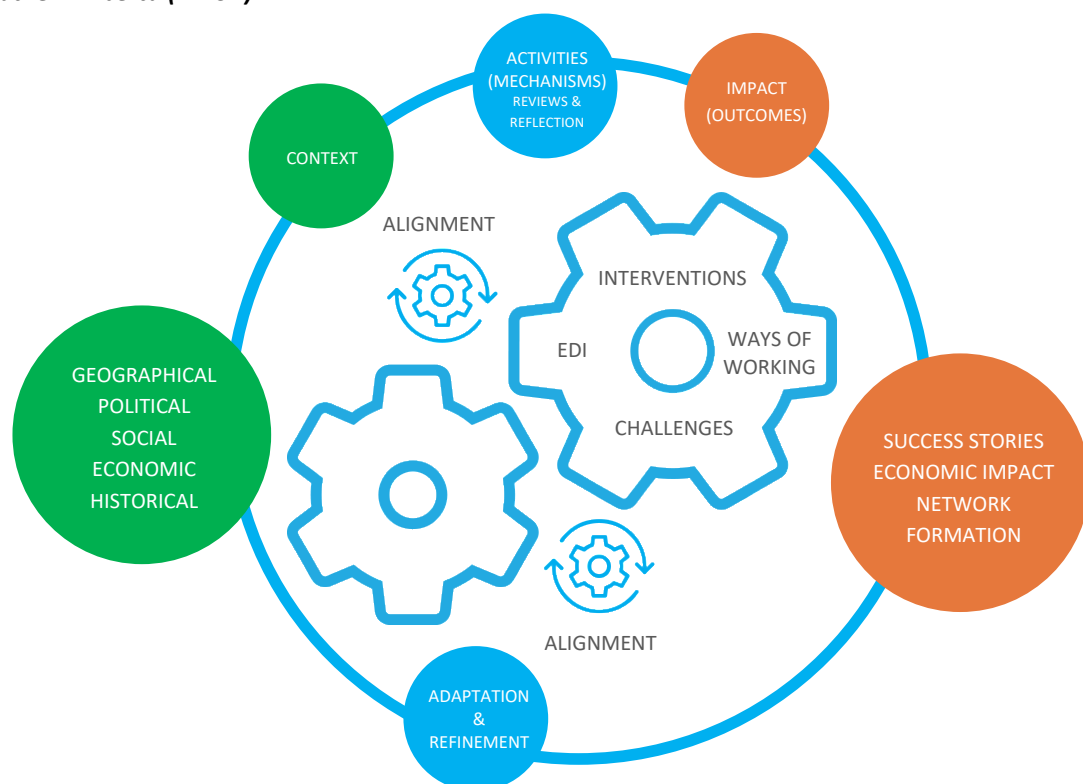
To populate the framework in Figure A, a multimethod approach was used that included interviews, document review, network analysis, an economic impact assessment and cases of 'success stories.' The synthesis of these data streams allowed the identification of a series of key observations and action insights for the formation, curation and maturation of future innovation networks. These included:

RINSA has had an impact on the entrepreneurial ecosystems in southern Alberta

Throughout its short history RINSA has worked with the communities of southern Alberta to help create an environment within which innovation and entrepreneurship can and has flourished. The founding of RINSA was, in itself, entrepreneurial and not without risk as it bought together a number of different organizations that had not worked together in the past, exploited a window of opportunity with the development of Tecconnect and access to funding, and established a way of working that would help shape its future agenda. As RINSA matured it continued to adopt that

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approach in the activities and programs it devised, including a ground-breaking commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion with a specific focus on both women entrepreneurs and those from Indigenous communities. The overall success of this approach is clear in the preceding chapter, with explicit examples of individual successes, the creation of a robust and strengthening network of institutions resulting in tangible economic impact in terms of jobs created and contribution to GDP.

Relationship and trust building is central to the development of a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem

One of the recurrent themes that came out of the interviews and workshops was how members of RINSA trusted one another. This does not mean different founding members did not have their own specific agendas, nor that there were no disagreements, but there was an intrinsic belief in what the early founders were trying to do and an inherent trust between their individual representatives who sat at the RINSA board table. Arguably the local alignment of the ecosystem occurred in spite of divergent influences from other levels of government. Nevertheless, as the innovation literature tells us, innovation is a contact sport meaning that it is about people, relationships, and ideas and how they converge through entrepreneurship to create novel services and products. Critical to this is having trusted collaboration throughout the innovation pipeline. The deeper the relationships and knowledge of each partner organization and participating representatives (and other members), the better connection, usage, and collaboration is yielded as a result.

Engaging with Indigenous and other under-represented communities takes time, effort and respect

As noted in Chapter Three, one of the standout successes of RINSA has been its engagement with different communities, including the Indigenous entrepreneurs in southern Alberta. A recurrent theme that came out of the interviews – including with members of this community – was how RINSA had worked closely with Indigenous economic development organizations on reserve and in the surrounding communities in offering its services and support to local entrepreneurs. Given the challenging social and economic context that these communities face the role of innovation in creating economic activity is of critical importance. It is a testament everyone involved with RINSA that they prioritized the engagement of Indigenous communities as core to its programmatic activities but as noted by many interviewees invested the time and effort in a respectful way that is now beginning to see dividends.

It is important not to 'over manage' the ecosystem, giving entrepreneurs time and space to develop whilst providing support and guidance where needed

An important observation arising from the realist, retrospective, impact case study is allowing networks the time and space to grow and develop in their own context delivering on local need for local people. There is a tendency that such interventions can be over managed, partly due to understandable accountably demands from government funders. Getting the right balance between autonomy and accountability seems key for the successful curation of an innovation network and entrepreneurial ecosystem and broadly speaking RINSA and its funder, Alberta Innovates, have found that equilibrium. An example of which include the small project fund which was used sensibly in facilitating relationship building in the community without requiring excessive reporting.

Meaningful measurement is difficult and should not stifle innovation

The assessment of innovation and entrepreneurship is difficult but critical to understanding impact. Part of this is developing 'metrics that matter' and the other part is having the data infrastructure in place. At the same time, and as noted above, it is important to have the right balance of metrics, so measurement is not overburdensome inadvertently dampening innovative activities. Indeed, given that innovation should embrace failure it may be the case that measuring individual program contributions could in itself be counterproductive. As result a sophisticated and mature approach is needed to when it comes to developing metrics for innovation networks and entrepreneurship

ecosystems like RINSA. What was clear from undertaking this impact case study is that current data that is captured for all the Regional Innovation Networks (RINs), including RINSA, needs reviewing as it was not of sufficient quality or quantity for both the network analysis nor economic impact analysis. Additionally, the interviews illustrated the power of qualitative data as it allowed key protagonists to tell their story both adding a richness to the data but also highlight key issues that would not necessarily be picked up in the metrics.

Actionable insights

When inviting new partners to the network, ensure there is an understanding of the expectations of collaborative relationships and governance

It should go without saying but all innovation networks should have an effective leadership group, built on collaboration with transparent governance in place that is underpinned by an agreed and shared set of guiding principles. As networks inevitably require constant refreshment it is important that these guiding principles are shared with new partners and 'live' throughout the network through the constant sharing of success – as one interviewee put it, 'successes shared are success sustained'.

Don't reinvent the wheel, but learn from other networks

A number of the key observations and actionable insights identified through this retrospective impact case study are applicable to the other RINs in Alberta, and innovation networks elsewhere. Whilst it is important to learn from others it is also as important to acknowledge the specific context within which RINSA developed and examine whether the observations and insights are indeed transferable to other contexts. There are some areas – for example in collecting consistent data (see Table 2) – where it is clearly appropriate that a region wide approach be adopted. But as is clear from the realist approach adopted for this review context also maters, meaning local solution should not be drowned out through a desire to standardize.

Small amounts of 'soft' funding oils the wheels of entrepreneurship

As mentioned earlier, the TDA fund was a unique innovation for RINSA that could be adopted by other innovation networks elsewhere. It helped partner organizations engage in RIN-related schemes and made them feel part of the organization. The availability of small amounts of money that is not tied up in form filling and red tape can have a disproportionate impact in helping to build relationships and developing the network. It is a 'lean' and relatively cheap example of how to support innovation which may be especially appliable to small communities.

Focus on marketing and awareness building of RINSA (and other RINS)

One of the challenges that RINSA faces, that is likely to be the case for other RINs and innovation networks, is that an entrepreneur may not know who to contact and when. This is the classic 'front door' issue i.e. which door do you knock on if you need help, and came up a number of times in interviews. As such RINSA, RINs and Alberta Innovates could do more to raise awareness of the services that they provide, including target advertising of the RIN coaching, mentoring and networking/workshop services. Lead partners can also contribute by being visible and present, in consistent fashion, to the other partners and the broader community, and keep engagement and value of membership a focus.

Coach entrepreneurs to share strategically keeps businesses growing

One issue that arose in the interviews is that advisors and RIN members who deal directly with clients need training in effective coaching and mentoring. All the regional networks should emphasize that a client of a RIN is a client of the entire Alberta system, so interactive referrals are key. A referring advisor must follow up to ensure the client is getting quality services and effective coaching. The principle that 'once a client - always a client' should be held by all RIN's. The local network should require an advisor to check back on progress, emphasizing that the personal touch is key.

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to a realist impact case study (ICS) of the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA)

This report describes a retrospective realist impact case study (ICS) of the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA). Covering a 10-year period, since RINSA's inception in 2011, the results from this ICS will provide actionable insights to inform program design for all regional innovation networks (RINs) in Alberta, as well as inform Alberta Innovates' strategy for enhancing a vibrant 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' in the province. As such, the aim of this ICS was to learn more about network effects. This theoretical 'realist' framing moves away from the simple question as to whether a specific program worked (or not) to a more nuanced one that elucidates: What works (or doesn't work)? For whom (and to what extent)? In which circumstances does it work? How and why does it work? In short, a realist approach seeks to understand *how* a program *causes or contributes to* the desired outcome.[1] In the context of analyzing the impact of RINSA, the overarching or governing question that guides the ICS follows is:

> **In what way has RINSA contributed to the impact and continual learning of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in southern Alberta over the past 10 years?**

Alberta Innovates, RINs and RINSA support the development of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the province

Alberta Innovates is committed to supporting the development of a technology entrepreneurial ecosystem in Alberta. Since a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem is a key strategic enabler for building a technology-rich economy[2], Alberta Innovates supports a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem through the programs, networks and connections provided to entrepreneurs and start-ups to commercialize their innovations and scale their businesses.[3] The goal is to mobilize and accelerate entrepreneurs and small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across the client journey and to commercialize innovations and knowledge-based products (Alberta Innovates, 2020a). One of the key funding instruments for a vibrant entrepreneurship ecosystem are highly connected Regional Innovation Networks

> *"A lot of times companies want to work with the College, but they don't know how. Or they'd want to work with the University, and they don't know how. So, the Regional Innovation Network shepherded some of that, helping with how to get in touch with the University, who do we talk to, and how can we structure things." – Interviewee*

(RINs). RINs are currently complemented with the introduction of the new pan Alberta accelerator funding that focuses on supporting the scaling and growth of both entrepreneurs and companies in Alberta. Alberta Innovates currently supports eight RINs in Alberta. Given the importance of networks to contributing to innovation[4] and entrepreneurial ecosystem, a qualitative meta-analysis was conducted by Dr. Geoff Gregson concurrently with the ICS study. This metanalysis has the combined purpose of building on the research evidence to inform Alberta Innovates' Entrepreneurial Investments (EI) business unit on how networks help build a strong and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem for Alberta. More specifically:

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[1] Note throughout this report references that are cited as footnotes are supporting information, whilst those included in brackets arise from the document review listed in Annex C.
[2] See Alberta's Action Plan: 4155538-2008-connect-albertas-action-plan-bringing-technology-market.pdf.
[3] https://open.alberta.ca/publications/a31p7.
[4] Cross, P (2020). An Entrepreneurial Canada? Understanding Canada's Chronic Lack of Innovation and How We Can Fix It. MacDonald Institute. https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/20200901_Innovation_Creative_Destruction_Cross_PAPER_FWeb.pdf

- How network theories contribute to understanding entrepreneurial ecosystems?
- How network analysis is used for assessing and measuring network effects that contribute to strong entrepreneurial ecosystems?
- What network effects most influence high performance and impact?

Findings from the meta-analysis suggests multiple advantages and benefits for Alberta entrepreneurs and enterprises engaged in networks. Networks are grounded in an information advantage, establish membership affiliation and social relations, and set a context for exchange of knowledge, information, and resources.[5]

The RINs are "entrepreneur-centric, community-based networks with the goal of providing programs and services to accelerate growth of technology and knowledge-based businesses" (Alberta Innovates, 2020)[6]. Three networks were initially launched in 2011, with a further five subsequently established making up a 'network of networks', known as the Alberta Innovation Network (AIN). The eight RINS, with their date of establishment are:

- Calgary – Calgary Innovation Coalition (2008)
- Central Alberta – Central Alberta Regional Innovation Network (2008)
- Edmonton – Edmonton Regional Innovation Network (2008)
- East Central Alberta – East Central Alberta Regional Innovation Network (2016)
- Northeast Alberta – Wood Buffalo Regional Innovation Network (2017)
- Northwest Alberta – Grande Prairie Regional Innovation Network (2015)
- Southeast Alberta – APEX: Southeast Alberta Regional Innovation Network (2016)
- Southern Alberta – Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (2011).

By March 2022, Alberta Innovates invested $19.7 million in RINs to support technology-based Alberta companies (Alberta Innovates, 2020: email communications). The eight networks constitute the Alberta Innovation Network (AIN), a cooperative of regional networks that provide support, programming, and networking connections to SMEs to aid in the growth and commercialization of their technology and innovation (RINSA, n.d.-a).

The RIN Co-Developed Principles are[7]:

- Technology and knowledge-based entrepreneur-centric: Focus on Alberta based individuals or companies that are focused on commercializing new technology and knowledge-based products and/or services into scalable, high growth businesses.
- Pan-Alberta (AIN): Collectively supporting the collaboration and growth of companies across Alberta by working together as RINs in activities such as sharing services and co-developing programs.
- Community-based: Respond and design solutions for the local innovation community by identifying local gaps and capitalizing on regional strengths.
- Interconnected for sharing and learning: Best practices are shared within stakeholders of a RIN and between RINs to accelerate learnings, find synergies, and elevate the region and the province as a whole.

[5] Gregson, G (2022). Meta-analysis of Networks. Alberta Innovates. https://albertainnovates.ca/app/uploads/2022/07/AI-Meta-Analysis-of-Networks.pdf
[6] https://albertainnovates.ca/programs/regional-innovation-networks/
[7] https://albertainnovates.ca/programs/regional-innovation-networks/

- Adaptable: Innovation ecosystems are always evolving. Programs and services offered by the RINs adapt to changing business models, technologies, and available resources. RINS are designed to test new ideas and adapt to change. They are agile and therefore adaptable to current needs of innovative entrepreneurs.
- Collective Governance: Collaborative governance for the RINs should enable the RIN to: Include diverse voices, respond to diverse needs, enable participation, enable collaboration, provide clear decision making and accountability structures, and support information sharing.
- Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion: Support and enable access for under-represented populations including groups which are underrepresented in the entrepreneurial and technical, research and innovation ecosystem such as Indigenous persons, newcomers, black, bi-racial persons of colour, LGBTQ2+ persons, differently abled persons and women.

Technology Development Advisors (TDAs), who are directly funded and employed by Alberta Innovates, are strategically located throughout the province to work within each of the RINs as senior business advisors (Alberta Innovates, 2020b). The TDAs provide a range of services related to coaching, capital, and technology for knowledge-based SMEs in collaboration with Alberta's RINs. TDAs are senior business advisors who provide one-on-one guidance, community connections, and assist with identifying non-dilutive capital to support entrepreneurs and SMEs in technology or knowledge-based industries developing innovative technology.[8] The stated objectives of the TDA program are to: [9]

- Identify and connect Alberta technology and knowledge-based SMEs (clients) in the innovation ecosystem to the available business and technology development services in Alberta and Canada;
- Work with and provide in-kind support to the RINs in their strategies and activities related to TDA clients, the Alberta Innovates strategic plan and the RIN program;
- Assist clients in identifying and moving through their next steps along the client journey through coaching, connecting, and advising;
- Assist clients in accessing non-dilutive direct funding from Alberta Innovates when appropriate and support the AI grants due diligence process; and
- Contribute to strengthen the innovation ecosystem by enhancing the entrepreneurial culture in Alberta.

Three TDAs are located in Calgary; two are in Edmonton; and one each in Lethbridge, Red Deer, Lloydminster, Medicine Hat, and Fort McMurray. The TDAs' primary roles are to assist SMEs in navigating the innovation ecosystem and to provide expert technology development advice to improve the likelihood of successful development and commercialization of the product or service. TDAs act as business coaches and proactive connectors for SMEs and provide SMEs with advice in a range of areas, including technology development, finance, lean manufacturing, and market/industry assessment.

Tecconnect and RINSA

The Tecconnect business incubator was established in 2011 as a "centre for new commerce" by Economic Development Lethbridge (EDL). It was intended to attract, incubate, and develop technology companies through commercialization of products and services, and through that both diversify the economy into emerging technology fields and to secure local post-secondary IT graduates as a qualified workforce in the region. The City of Lethbridge provided a capital grant of

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[8] *https://albertainnovates.ca/programs/technology-development-advisors/*.
[9] FWCO Management Consultants Ltd & Alberta Innovates. (2020). Evaluation of the Technology Development Advisors Program: Final Report.

$1.16 million which triggered financial participation of the Western Economic Diversity Community Adjustment Fund of $4.39 million. The combined funding of $5.55 million was allocated to the construction project and the acquisition of data centre capital equipment. The centre provides office space, training, as well as business advisor support and networking opportunities in order to connect start-ups with customers, influencers and experts (EDL, n.d., 2012).

Tecconnect was the catalyst and key partner within RINSA. In order to trigger funding for Tecconnect program delivery, the legacy organization of Alberta Innovates – Technology Futures (AITF) required that a partnership be formed between EDL and the two post-secondary institutions in Lethbridge – the University of Lethbridge and the Lethbridge College – leading to the AITF funding and launch of RINSA in 2011. The network adopted a client service model, whereby it assists start-ups and small businesses to successfully navigate the commercialization system through programs, services, and resources. The primary clients of RINSA are Southwest Alberta-based SMEs, more particularly technology or knowledge-based entrepreneurs. Although RINSA's base location is in Lethbridge (Alberta Innovates, 2020b; RINSA, n.d.-a) it "continues to be an active participant and leader for the rural regions, and the AIN network, in how [it] can further create a coordinated pan-provincial approach that anchors the entrepreneur to the independent RIN regions while also providing seamless support for client stakeholders' entire entrepreneurial journeys through the resources and supports available throughout the province" (RINSA, 2021e).

RINSA aids start-ups and SMEs to help them navigate the commercialization system through programs, services, and resources (RINSA, n.d.-a). The main objectives of the network are:

1. Identify gaps and trends in the innovation ecosystem related to entrepreneur and venture development and adapt service delivery and programs to fill those gaps;
2. Provide an inclusive collaborative governance framework for the region to deliver a collaborative and coordinated network approach involving key players, client representatives and stakeholders in the region's innovation ecosystem;
3. Create opportunities for shared learnings with the Alberta Innovation Network to reduce inefficiencies, fragmentation, and gaps; and
4. Contribute to strengthening the innovation ecosystem by enhancing the entrepreneurial culture in Alberta.

To achieve these objectives, RINSA offers a variety of programs and services, including access to experienced business advisors, ecosystem navigators, one-on-one guidance, matchmaking and network connections, training and workshops, as well as meeting and work space (RINSA, n.d.-a).

RINSA grew over time, and now includes 12 members (RINSA, 2019c). RINSA is comprised of funded and unfunded partners. RINSA's funded stakeholders include EDL, Lethbridge College, and the University of Lethbridge, [10] Unfunded stakeholders include the following organizations: Piikani Resource Development; Blood Tribe Economic Development; Community Futures Lethbridge Region; SouthGrow Regional Initiative; Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance; the National Research Council of Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program (NRC-IRAP); Alberta Innovates; Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce; and the Town of Okotoks, Economic Development Office (RINSA, 2021e).

RINSA's governance structure is made up of three bodies: the RINSA Executive Group, the RINSA Advisory Group, and the RINSA Working Group. While both the Executive Group and the RINSA Working Group include representatives from both funded and unfunded partners, the Advisory Board consists of the Chief Executive Officer of Economic Development Lethbridge (EDL), the Provost and Vice-President (Academic) of the University of Lethbridge, the Associate Vice President of

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[10] "Note: Blood Tribe Economic Development and Piikani Resource Development Ltd. are considered in our [RINSA's] budget line item 'RINSA Fund for Indigenous Entrepreneur Programming and Development.'"

Research of Lethbridge College, and a Technology Development Advisor (TDA) from AI (RINSA, 2021e). The Advisory Group is responsible for coordinating information and organizing client programs, services, and referrals in a way that guarantees maximum client benefit, supports regional operations, and reduces duplication (Lethbridge College, 2012).

The ICS of RINSA has been developed using a mixed-methods approach

The idea for conducting the ICS was initiated by the community, when Renae Barlow, VP of Entrepreneurship & Innovation for Economic Development Lethbridge contacted Dr. Kathryn Graham, Executive Director of the Impact Action Lab (formerly of Performance Management and Evaluation) and Terry Rachwalski (Executive Director of Entrepreneurial Investments) with a business case to conduct an impact case study to document the evolution of RINSA over the last 10 years, communicate its value and impact, and share lessons learned and actionable insights with other RINs, Alberta Innovates and other ecosystem players. This provided Alberta Innovates with the opportunity to conduct an impact case study as well as advance the "science of science" of impact. Given the timing, there was an opportunity to have the ICS as an overall case that could weave the findings from Dr. Geoff Gregson's, qualitative meta-analysis of network analysis as well as results from a network and economic analysis being conducted by Goss Gilroy Inc. An impact case study approach was conducted previously when Alberta Innovates (AIHS at the time) as part of a consortium of international funders worked with RAND Europe to better understand how to accelerate mental health research evidence into practice for patients.[11] Consequently, the methodological genesis for the RINSA ICS built on the series of studies undertaken between 2005 and 2013 under the banner of 'Project Retrosight'[12], including one on cardiovascular research that was partially funded by Alberta Innovates at the time.[13,14] The name Project Retrosight is derived from two landmark studies in science and innovation policy. The first – Project Hindsight[15] – was a study sponsored by the US Department of Defense that examined the incremental advances of various technologies. The second was Julius Comroe's book, *Retrospectroscope: Insights into Medical Discovery*.[16] Comroe examined new life-saving advances in medicine and how they had come about. At the same time, in a direct response to Project Hindsight, he worked with Robert Dripps to trace the research antecedents of clinical advances in cardiovascular medicine. This study was described in an article in *Science*.[17] The idea of Project Retrosight was to develop these ideas by tracing prospectively, with the benefit of hindsight, the translation of, and payback from, funded research projects.

Project Retrosight involved developing a series of case studies, based on a mix of data sources (document review, key informant interviews and bibliometric and other data analysis), and then comparing and contrasting the case studies to elicit barriers and facilitators that could be associated with successful research translation. A case study approach was used as, in general, case studies provide a rich source of material when 'how' or 'why' questions are proposed.[18] In the context of

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[11] Wooding S, Pollitt A, Castle-Clarke, S, et al. & **Grant, J** (2013). *Mental Health Retrosight. Understanding the returns from research. (lessons from schizophrenia). Policy Report*. RAND Europe, Cambridge (RR-325-GBF). https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR325.html.

[12] Guthrie et al (2016). A 'DECISIVE' approach to research funding: Lessons from three Retrosight studies. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1132.html.

[13] Wooding et al (2011) *Project Retrosight. Understanding the returns from cardiovascular and stroke research: policy report* (No. MG-1079-RS). Cambridge, UK: RAND Europe. https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1079.html.

[14] As an aside, the idea that became Project Retrosight grew from conversations between Martin Buxton and Jonathan Grant during breaks in a 1999 workshop on research impact organized in Banff by the Alberta Heritage Foundation for Medical Research (now Alberta Innovates)

[15] Sherwin and Isenson (1967). Project Hindsight. A Defense Department study on the utility of research. *Science* 161: 1571–7. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/6025113/.

[16] Comroe (1977). *Retrospectroscope: insights into medical discovery*. Menlo Park, California: Von Gehr Press.

[17] Comroe and Dripps (1976). Scientific basis for the support of biomedical science. *Science*, 192: 105–111. https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.769161.

[18] Yin (2018). *Case study research and application: design and methods* (6th Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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Project Retrosight, the case studies provide a detailed picture of what led to establishing the grant, how the research progressed and how it subsequently developed. The conceptual approach adopted for the Restrosight studies was the Payback Framework, which was developed by Martin Buxton and Steve Hanney in 1996, and is an applied logic model for research funding.[19]

For the RINSA impact cases study an alternative approach is used, given the non-linear and iterative nature of innovation. Accordingly, a realist approach[20] is adopted that traditionally is focused on C+M=O framework, where C is context, M is Mechanism and O outcome. This framework has been adapted for the RINSA ICS, so the mechanisms is termed activity and outcome impact, but the underpinning theoretical idea is the same. Namely that impact when thinking about innovation, and RINSA specifically, will be an interaction between context and activity that is likely to be dynamic, time and place dependent, and iterative i.e. a process of learning and relearning with multiple and continuous feedback loops.

Another differentiator with Project Retrosight is the RINSA ICS is based on a single case, rather than a multiple set of case studies. From a methodological viewpoint this is entirely acceptable as it allows in-depth exploration of the 'how' and 'why' questions associated with the establishment, evolution and impact of RINSA. However, it will be important that the results of the RINSA ICS are not over generalized to other RINs.

In other words, this theoretical framing moves away from the simple question as to whether a specific program worked (or not) to a more nuanced one that elucidates: What works (or doesn't work)? For whom (and to what extent)? In which circumstances does it work? How and why does it work? In short, a realist approach seeks to understand *how* a program *causes or contributes to* the desired outcome.[21]

In the context of assessing the impact of RINSA, the overarching or governing question that guides the ICS follows is:

> **In what way has RINSA contributed to the impact and continual learning of an entrepreneurial ecosystem in southern Alberta over the past 10 years?**

In keeping with the realist framework, in addition to the governing question, the ICS explores a set of questions structured around three domains: context, activities, and impact as summarized in the Box A and elaborated on in Appendix A.

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[19] Buxton and Hanney (1996). How can payback from health services research be assessed? *Journal of Health Services Research and Policy*, 1: 35–43. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/10180843/.

[20] Pawson and Tilley (1997). *An introduction to scientific realist evaluation.* In Chelimsky & Shadish (Eds.), *Evaluation for the 21st century: A handbook* (p. 405–418). Sage.

[21] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879435/Magenta_Book_supplementary_guide._Realist_Evaluation.pdf

Box A: Primary case study questions

To address these questions, and those listed in Appendix A, a mixed-method approach for data collection was used as summarized in Figure 1 and detailed in Appendices B to E. This included:

- A series of four **exploratory workshops** with 14 key individuals involved with RINSA, both in its foundation and more recently in accessing its services. Notes from the workshops were taken and emergent themes identified which were explored and validated in the interviews.
- **Key informant interviews** with 74 individuals, representing a range of stakeholder groups including 13 representatives from the funded and unfunded partner organizations; 31 from affiliated community service providers and collaborators; and 30 representatives from client companies. With the consent of the interviewees each interview was recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were provided to a third-party social research company who reviewed and coded the transcripts to an agreed code-book developed by the primary interviewer. The analysis of the interviews was provided in a separate report that informed this case study write up.
- **Review of documents** including annual reports, strategy documents and funding agreements. Over 190 documents were reviewed and coded by the third-party social research company. The analysis of the interviews was provided in a separate report that informed this case study write up.
- **Success stories**. Potential companies were identified based on information available online, comments in RINSA annual reports and through the tacit knowledge of RINSA staff. Based on this preliminary information a story was drafted and shared with the client to fill in missing information and to confirm the accuracy. Finalization of the success story was an iterative process between the client and the Alberta Innovates representative, reaching completion when the client approved the success story.

- **Network analysis**. A network analysis with three objectives. First, to describe the current state of the RINSA network, with an emphasis on network characteristics that likely generate benefits for its clients. Second, to show the evolution of RINSA over time. Finally, to identify what conditions and mechanisms would need to be in place in the future to most effectively use this research method for evaluating RINSA or other similar innovation networks.
- **Economic impact analysis.** Implementation of Statistics Canada's Input-Output Model to measure RINSA's economic impact in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) contribution along with the associated jobs supported (employment) and productivity improvement.

Figure 1: Overview of evidence and data sources for RINSA ICS
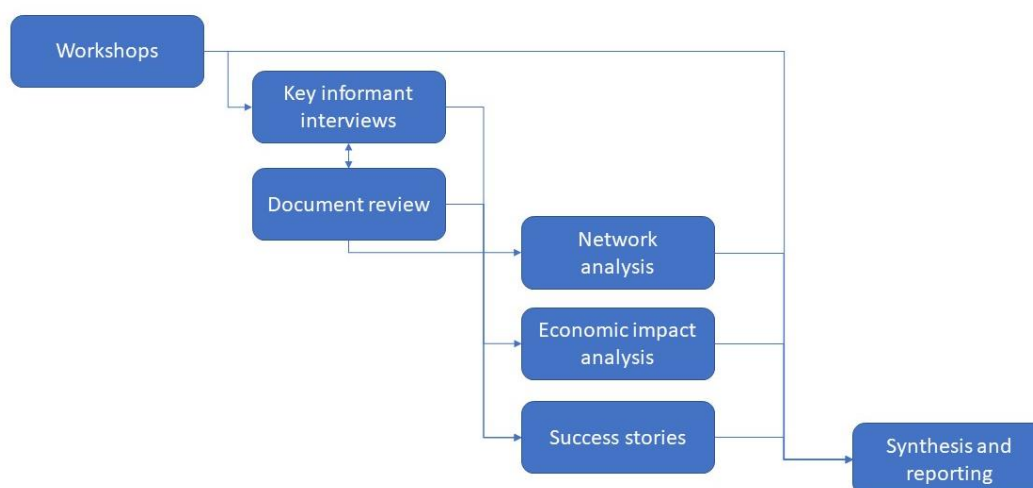
These six sources of data and evidenced are synthesized in this retrospective ICS, telling the story of RINSA since its inception. The report is structured around the realist framework, with the next chapter drawing out key contextual issues that laid the groundwork for the evolution of RINSA. Chapter Three then covers the activities (or mechanisms) that RINSA has provided over its 10 years of existence, and critically how these changed given the changing context. Chapter Four recounts the impacts of RINSA, including the quantitative economic and network analysis and series of 'success stories' to illustrate more qualitatively the real-world impact RINSA has had on the people of southern Alberta. The final chapter then draws these experiences together by identified a series of actionable insights that can be used in future rounds of funding for RINs, and widely for those interested in innovation networks more broadly. The Appendices provide methodological details, including for the economic modelling and network analysis.

Chapter 2: The context for both the establishment and development of RINSA evolved over the past 10 years

In this chapter, the wider context for the development and evolution of RINSA is examined. In the framing of a realist evaluation the purpose of this chapter is to describe the features and situation within which RINSA operates and how those unique characteristics – which can change over time – shaped, and where shaped, by the mechanisms or activities described in the next chapter.[22] The chapter opens by describing the region of southern Alberta, allowing readers to be able to understand some of the inherent opportunities and challenges of establishing an entrepreneurial ecosystem in a rural economy. This is followed by an examination of the founding culture that proved to be so important in RINSA's success, along with a description of the underlying governance approach and financial investments.

Southern Alberta is a rural agricultural region not dominated by a major city and quite different in geography to other parts of Alberta

The map in Figure 2 locates southern Alberta, and RINSA's geographical reach, in the context of Alberta. The Queen Elizabeth II Highway that runs north and south through Alberta showcases everything that the province is known for. It gives you a glimpse of the cold, bitter northern life that residents in the Peace Region deal with for half the year. It winds southernly through both Edmonton and Calgary, the provinces two biggest cities and both hubs of culture and industry in their own unique ways. As you leave Calgary, it is soon very apparent that southern Alberta is vastly different in so many ways than any other part of the province, or Canada for that matter. The snow that covers the ground is non-existent or will be in a day after warm chinook winds (also called the snow-eater) blows in from the mountains. If it is summer and fall, acres and acres of lush farmland can be seen stretching across the prairie until they disappear into the Rocky Mountains, which dot the western part of southern Alberta all the way down past the Canada/United States border.

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[22] http://www.ramesesproject.org/media/RAMESES_II_Context.pdf

Figure 2: Map of locating southern Alberta

★ RINSA acknowledges that we are gathered on the lands of the Blackfoot people of the Canadian Plains and pays respect to the Blackfoot people of the past, present and future while recognizing and respecting their cultural heritage, beliefs an relationship to the land. The City of Lethbridge is also home to the Metis Nation of Alberta, Region III.

ALBERTA, CANADA

Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA)

Located on the lands of the Blackfoot people and Metis Nation of Alberta

● Lethbridge

This part of the world just looks different than any other region, it also attracts people, innovation, and collaborative out-of-box thinkers making southern Alberta a destination for families and businesses alike.

ALBERTA INNOVATES

The biggest census metropolitan area and the anchor for the region is the city of Lethbridge with a population of just over 100,000 residents. It is located two hours south of Calgary, an hour from the Coutts, Montana border crossing into the United States, the only 24-hour international commercial border crossing in the province and 100 kilometres from Waterton National Park, one of the top tourist destinations in Western Canada. Other cities and towns of note in southern Alberta include Taber, Fort McLeod, Pincher Creek, Claresholm, Cardston, Raymond and Magrath. The total trade area population for the region of nearly 300,000 people.

Oki is the Blackfoot word for greetings or hello and the official greeting of the City of Lethbridge who proudly acknowledges the language, culture and heritage of the Blackfoot peoples, and all Indigenous peoples who call Lethbridge home, with a commitment to continue to foster reconciliation and healing. Southern Alberta is also the home of the Blackfoot Confederacy (Siksikaitsitapi), a tribal council of First Nations including Kainai-Blood Tribe, Siksika, Peigan-Piikani and Aamskapi Pikuni. Lethbridge is also home to the Métis Nation of Alberta Region.

The climate in the region makes for optimal growing conditions for southern Alberta farmers and producers. The combination of relatively mild winters, an abundance of year-round sunshine and strategic investment in agricultural infrastructure make the land in southern Alberta some of the most fertile in the world. Chinooks do blow in from the westerly Rocky Mountains making wind power a viable option, and many wind (and solar) farms can be seen throughout the region. Wind power as an energy source is so prevalent in the area, Lethbridge College, one of two world-class post-secondary institutions in the city, offers a wind turbine technician certificate program.

Another bonus for southern Alberta residents is quality of life. Residential homes in the region offer a wide array of options for students looking to attend classes, families looking for a starter home and numerous options are available for those looking to retire to a quiet community. Southern Alberta is an outdoor enthusiast's paradise with many provincial tourist attractions, parks, trails and recreation opportunities dotting the map from the westerly Rocky Mountains to the coulees, plains and lakes heading easterly.

Southern Alberta truly is an experience all to itself, and it's no wonder it plays as a backdrop to so many successes in business, sport, innovation, and life. The hard-working, collaborative spirit that plays part of the rich mining, agriculture and manufacturing history of the region can still be seen today in the people and sentiment of southern Alberta, and just as the skies and sun seem never ending here, so do the possibilities.

RINSA's foundation in 2011 built on a pre-existing trusted relationships between key institutions and individuals

Like the other Regional Innovation Networks (RINs), the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA) was established in follow-up to the 2008 provincial Action Plan for Bringing Technology to Market (Alberta Innovates, 2020b). In this plan, the government of Alberta highlighted the importance of building an innovation ecosystem in the province, noting the success of Albertan companies in applying science, research, and technology to develop innovations. Some of the actions outlined in the plan included strengthening access to regional business services to improve company investment-readiness, and introducing new technology development advisors, or TDAs as they colloquially became known (Government of Alberta, 2008).

It should be noted, however, that a number of interviewees recalled that at the time it was actually quite hard to convince the government and other institutions about the need for RINs, let alone something like RINSA. One stakeholder suggested it was challenging to convince the province that

there was enough demand for another association focused on creating an innovation network. As a part-time instructor at Lethbridge College this informant noted there was in fact interest from within the College and the University of Lethbridge, as well as from companies wanting to connect with these institutions but unsure how to do so.

Nevertheless, RINSA was formed in 2011 as a collaborative partnership between Economic Development Lethbridge/Tecconnect, Lethbridge College, and the University of Lethbridge with funding from Alberta Innovates. The Economic Development Lethbridge (EDL) Board of Directors had voted to build a technology business incubator (Tecconnect) to assist in diversifying the economy by supporting cluster development in emerging technology fields, building partnerships, and keeping local post-secondary IT graduates as a qualified workforce.

For many of the stakeholders interviewed, it was in fact Tecconnect that introduced them to RINSA, and thus the story of RINSA and Tecconnect are at times inseparable. Additional investments from Western Economic Diversification and private sector actors led to other major initiatives surrounding Tecconnect. As illustrated in Figure 3, In addition to the founding partners, a number of organization organizations joined RINSA over the past 10 years including National Research Council of Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program (NRC IRAP), Community Futures Lethbridge Region, Piikani Resource Development, Blood Tribe Economic Development, SouthGrow Regional Initiative, Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance, Okotoks Economic Development, and Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce.

Whilst on paper this foundation period may come across as being both linear and rational, as discussed in the following section, several interviewees and workshop participants stressed the challenges in navigating local politics, especially with the decision to locate Tecconnect startup incubator in the community as opposed to being traditionally located in the College or University. To a degree, as will be picked up in the final chapter, this is one of the lessons learned from RINSA's success – its semi-neutral location allowed it to flourish in ways and work with community partners in a non-traditional way that were probably unforeseen at the time. Indeed, one of the most salient themes coming out of the interviews is the multiple different routes by which people were introduced to RINSA especially in its early years.

Figure 3: RINSA partnerships and community relationships

rinsa PARTNERSHIPS & COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

● **INVESTMENTS & OTHER FUNDERS** ALBERTA INNOVATES

● **FUNDED PARTNERS**

Economic Development Lethbridge · tecconnect · Lethbridge College · University of Lethbridge · * · BLOOD TRIBE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT *

● **PARTNERS**

ALBERTA INNOVATES · Community Futures Lethbridge Region · LETHBRIDGE CHAMBER of COMMERCE · Okotoks · NRC·IRAP · SouthGrow Regional Initiative · SOUTHWEST

● **COLLABORATORS**

Alberta Wheat Commission	Community Futures Alberta Southwest	Industrial Association of Southern Alberta	Siksika Family Services
Alberta Women Entrepreneurs	Community Futures Treaty Seven	Lakeland College	Siksika Resource Development
ATB	Community Futures Highwood (Okotoks)	Lethbridge Family Services	Southern Alberta Alternative Energy
BDC	Community Futures Entre-Corp	McGill University	Partnership
Big Country Agricultural Society	(Medicine Hat)	Medicine Hat College	Southern Alberta Institute of Technology
Bow Valley College	Community Futures Wild Rose	MITACS	Southern Alberta Women in Business
Brooks Region Economic Development	Concordia University	Mount Royal University	Southeast Alberta Regional Innovation
Business Link	Drumheller Chamber of Commerce	National Angel Capital Organization	Network
Cactus Corridor Economic Development	East Central Alberta Regional Innovation	Northern Alberta Institute of Technology	Taber Economic Development
Calgary Innovation Coalition	Network	NSERC	Thunderbird Consulting
Canadian Agricultural Partnership	Economic Development Cochrane	Oldman River Regional Services Commission	Toronto Dominion Bank
Canadian Foundation for Innovation	Edmonton Regional Innovation Network	Olds College	Town of Taber
Canola Council of Canada	Execuserve	Okanagan College	Tsuut'ina Small Business Initiative
Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business	Farm Credit Canada	Plant Protein Alliance of Alberta	University of Alberta
Central Alberta Regional Innovation Network	Farming Smarter	Platform Calgary	University of Calgary
Chinook Applied Research Association	Futurpreneur Canada	Potato Growers of Alberta	Volunteer Lethbridge
Chinook Arch Regional Library System	Government of Alberta	PrairiesCan	Wheatland County Economic Development
Chinook Foundation Career Transitions	Grande Prairie Regional College	150 Startups \ Royal Bank of Canada	WESTEM
City of Lethbridge	Grande Prairie Regional Innovation Network	Saskatchewan Wheat Development	Wood Buffalo Regional Innovation Network
Claresholm Economic Development	InBridge Inc	Commission	

ALBERTA INNOVATES

Some of RINSA's 'clients' came directly via Tecconnect, with for example, several interviewees noted how they used Tecconnect for ad-hoc business meetings and came across RINSA almost by chance at one of their visits to the site. Multiple people said they became involved with RINSA by attending courses and utilizing business advisor services at Tecconnect, whilst another had attended the annual Tecconnect Challenge with Lethbridge College for seven years with their multimedia production students and again through that relationship became aware of RINSA.

As important, other stakeholders were introduced to RINSA via partner and member organizations, illustrating RINSA's role as a 'connector' often over different generations of relationships. One interviewee became involved at Lethbridge College in engaging students with opportunities and programs at Tecconnect. Shortly after, they became the representative for the College at the RINSA board. They noted that by introducing students to the ecosystem while they're in college provides the students with established contacts and a pipeline to resources once they graduate. Additionally, this partner was approached by RINSA members for applied research services at the College, so they have established a good working collaboration with the network. The founder of a AdvancedAg, Phyllis Day Chief, worked as an instructor at Lethbridge College and brought up an idea for a biotech company to a fellow instructor. The relationship with that colleague led to many useful industry connections. Eventually AdvancedAg applied for a Micro Voucher with Alberta Innovates which made a big difference and helped their company develop new software. As Phyllis, stated: *"We focused on agriculture for a while. Now, we're going back to water. Actually, more specifically, the aquaculture industry [...]. There are some growing pains. But I would say without parts of RINSA, we wouldn't be in existence today, quite literally."* That entrepreneur's son, Joshua Day Chief, who took over the business, is now a Tecconnect Business Advisor and leading an Entrepreneur Committee through the Blackfoot Confederacy and newest member of RINSA 2022. AdvancedAg's success story is in Chapter 4.

Similarly, multiple key informants were introduced to RINSA through their involvement with the University of Lethbridge. This includes both instructors and students. One stakeholder came into RINSA after the University of Lethbridge hired them to put together a family and small business program funded by the Royal Bank of Canada. This stakeholder speaks of the entrepreneurial spirit that existed in their community long before RINSA was established and how that was critical for its success.

Another example involves a student – Allyson Cikor, who, immediately after graduating from the University of Lethbridge, became involved with a start-up focused on Virtual Reality/Augmented Reality technologies which had its office in the Tecconnect building. The access to the ecosystem through this physical space was incredibly helpful for Allyson. As someone who worked in the Tecconnect building, she was able to attend events for free and attributes the exposure to other entrepreneurs as the motivation behind starting her own video game studio. At this point they found that the network provided useful help on the traditional business end of things but did not yet have enough supports for specific game development processes. After becoming an instructor at Lethbridge College in VR/AR, Allyson began working closely with RINSA as a business advisor with WESTEM[23]. Recognizing the issue around supports for entertainment, media, game development, and VR/AR, she founded the Lethbridge Game Developers Guild with the help of the network. As she says reflecting on her association with RINSA:

> *"And at that time, our office was out of the Tecconnect building. I believe there was some partnership there to get that going. And from a personal perspective, it was wonderful, because you're in a nice little ecosystem with a bunch of innovators and entrepreneurs, many of them on the cutting edge. You very easily walked down the aisle and speak to someone who's an expert in video designer or web backend services and things like that, which was wonderful."*

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[23] Women Entrepreneurs-in-STEM – described in more detail in the next chapter.

Allyson's success snapshot is in Chapter Four.

Not surprisingly, Economic Development Lethbridge (EDL), one of the founders, was another source of introductions to RINSA's in the early days. While working as an economic development officer, one interviewee became aware of RINSA. After this the partner moved to Lethbridge County where they became involved with Tecconnect from the perspective of a rural urban context. As part of a rural county with a largely agricultural entrepreneurial base, this informant noted that at the time there was not as much direct use of RINSA's resources as in the city. Another interviewee had some exposure to Tecconnect as a senior consultant – they had attended events at Tecconnect and had also used the server hosting resources offered by the organization. Currently, as an economic development manager for their town, this partner works with a RINSA member, SouthGrow Regional Initiative, which promotes programs and other offerings provided by RINSA.

It is interesting how the founding role of Alberta Innovates in RINSA was not a salient theme in the interviews, with little mention of the support being key in making introductions and such like. This may be an artifact of the interviews as this question was not explicitly asked. Indeed, there are exceptions to this, however, with one interviewee noting that they did not think any of the RINs would exist without the vision, funding, and assistance from Alberta Innovates. That said, this person also felt that there was a disconnect between Alberta Innovates and the other organizations in the network. Although in the early days, there was always somebody from Alberta Innovates taking part in meetings to at least observe there had been some confusion for this partner about who is taking the reins: Tecconnect, RINSA, or Alberta Innovates.

Nevertheless, as discussed in the next chapter, Alberta Innovates financial support for the Technology Development Advisors (TDAs) was a critical mechanism by which RINSA operated within the region. Indeed, the first TDA – Bill Halley – was seen as being instrumental in introducing numerous individuals to RINSA. For example, one foundational stakeholder recalls that Bill would frequent their board meetings and advocated for SouthGrow and Alberta SouthWest to be more formally part of the RINSA meetings. As a result, this stakeholder's organization became more involved and took part in meetings. Another notes that Bill introduced them to the Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge by Community Futures where they obtained funding and support for their business venture. Similarly, another client mentions Bill Halley as their first introduction to RINSA in 2013 when they started a software development company in Lethbridge. Through RINSA, they received support in obtaining funding as well as growing their company. Eventually they were able to sell their company.

In addition to Bill, the other individual who is mentioned numerous times by interviewees was Renae Barlow, the Vice President, Entrepreneurship & Innovation at Economic Development Lethbridge, who oversees, Tecconnect – Centre of Excellence for Entrepreneurship & Innovation. Multiple partners were introduced to RINSA through Renae. After connecting with Renae to discuss how Tecconnect could support their organization's entrepreneurs, especially ones without immediate access to programming on the local Indigenous reserve, one partner commented how they were invited to participate in RINSA meetings and was able to advocate for more resources, access to resources, and training for Blood Tribe Economic Development. Additionally, this partner was referred to WESTEM by Renae in order to fill some gaps for Indigenous entrepreneurs. As a result, they are now doing outreach work for WESTEM in several Indigenous communities. Similarly, another partner became aware of RINSA and Tecconnect through Renae who helped improve training for entrepreneurs within Treaty 7 First Nations. Immediately RINSA provided a place to host training sessions in the Tecconnect space as well as capital in terms of sponsors. Since then, they have kept in touch with the community and have participated in their meetings, establishing a collaborative relationship. Notably, another interviewee working to provide experimental learning

opportunities to high school students states that their involvement with RINSA has always been through Renae. They emphasized that Renae's vision has been a huge asset to the community.

Despite some of the early politics tension that arose when RINSA was founded, it is clear from the interviews, document review and workshops that the confluence of both institutions and individuals at a moment in time, with a shared understanding of what RINSA could achieve, provided a critical context for its development and ultimate success. When the network was created, each stakeholder was working on similar issues but in isolation from each other. Over time, stakeholders state that they developed an amazing synergy that relied on running through all the resources and capabilities that were available from all the partners. Perhaps less obvious, but what came through in the interviews and workshops, was the 'social capital' that had pre-existed amongst the key individuals in founding RINSA and how that inherent level of trust, understanding and indeed friendships was important in both establishing RINSA but also in setting a 'tone' for how it operated in the following 10 years.

It took some time for the long-term goals, governance, and organizational structure of RINSA to be settled and even then, it is still described as being 'organic'

Although there was general agreement that the strategic objective of RINSA was to support and stimulate the local economy and its diversification, by creating and retaining jobs in the region, whilst stewarding an environment for 'balanced growth', it took some time for that vision to be articulated into a set of agreed objectives. From the beginning, the partners involved in RINSA brainstormed to determine the best way to achieve their goals (RINSA, 2012a, 2012b). Some of the questions discussed included the following:

- How should RINSA operate as a cooperative group?
- What will be RINSA's future?
- What will success look like in the first twelve months of the network?
- Where should it be in the next three years?

The question of measuring progress and real-world results was also a key element in the early discussions (RINSA, 2012a, 2012b). The RINSA proposal comprised targets and specific metrics, including the number of companies served, number of industry events, number of jobs created, number of companies established or expanded, number of companies accessing funding, and number of students involved in applied research projects. In addition, client satisfaction and feedback were also incorporated in the measurements to track (RINSA, 2012a).

One of the strategies adopted by the network to achieve its long-term goals included efforts to increase its exposure and visibility (Lethbridge College, 2012, 2013). The first year of existence of RINSA was characterized by the establishment of various formal and informal collaborations with various organizations. Notably, the network's TDA actively sought to make and maintain connections with administrators and Economic Development Offices (EDO) throughout the region, as well as with municipalities, community organizations, and potential clients. Among other things, the TDA travelled in the region and participated in meetings to present the network and its programs (Lethbridge College, 2012). All of this was done to ensure that RINSA has a strong presence in the region and the province.

As noted above, the Tecconnect centre plays a key role in the achievement of RINSA's goals. Indeed, the centre quickly became a "*gathering place for like-minded technopreneurs and businesses to work together*". Already in the first year of the centre, there was evidence of synergies with the local information and communication technologies (ICT) sector (EDL, 2012). These discussions led to the

articulation of a set of common goals, that were outlined in the 2012 Annual Progress Report, which were to provide Small and Medium Sized Enterprises (SMEs) with (Lethbridge College, 2012):

- Innovation support, technology transfer and commercialization programs;
- Marketing, business development, training and export development services;
- Networking and matchmaking services;
- Business incubation opportunities;
- Access to funding at various stages (vouchers, angel investment, venture capital); and
- Access to funding through Community Futures' lending services for start-up and/or expansion.

However, multiple interviewees noted that the early days of the network came with challenges in terms of finding the right balance of collaboration and leadership, as well as, figuring out the right metrics to track progress and demand for the services. One challenge that was emphasized was that the metrics were ever-changing but giving the reins of the network to an incubator, which is highly adaptable, allows the network to shift easily. This comment on metrics is important as it provides an insight into the evolving objectives of RINSA and how it took some time for those initial stated objectives to be agreed and settled. Even then, over the 10 years of RINSA existence there has been (perhaps appropriate) 'mission creep' with, for example according to a number of stakeholders, an increased focus on commercialization and job creation driven in part by Alberta Innovates focus on these outcomes.

As discussed in detail in Chapter Four, this issue of evolving and flexible approach to organizational objectives and associated metrics hindered the economic and network impact analysis planned for this case study. The issue was there was not a fixed set of longitudinal information that could be used in such analysis. This, it should be stressed, is not a criticism as it would both be wrong to put the measurement cart before the strategic horse but also, as a number of interviewees noted, the flexibility, agility and adaptability of RINSA is one of its great strengths.

One of the things that helped in the early days, according to one stakeholder, was that they created a chart for themselves (Figure 4) and shared that through an extensive industry engagement initiative. As an interviewee recounts: "*We engaged the local companies and asked them, 'What should we be doing? What are your needs?' There's a big report available. We came away with a lot of knowledge about where we should spend our time, what we should prioritize, how to deliver services. And that's thanks to the leadership of the day, to actually take the time and go through that stakeholder input process really fed into our own organizations, but also RINSA as a whole*."

This consultation illustrated that companies sometimes just needed immediate help as opposed to a whole course. This was applied in the funding offered by RINSA, which was discretionary. The initiative called RINBRIDGE would bring all RINSA members together in a "huddle" to identify problems and brainstorm solutions. The University and the College would kick in with the researchers, lab resources, and then would create partnerships. After that the company would work with Tecconnect and utilize their resources. This approach was described by one interviewee "*a great organic synergy that worked really well because they were all engaged, all able to contribute, and if one of them couldn't do it, the other one would pitch in*." Moreover, fingerprints of this initial approach were still evident in how RINSA described itself in its 2018 Progress report:

> "*While Tecconnect and RINSA partners are primarily focused on start-up companies from ideation through to commercialization, there is a broad spectrum of support in our community for all stages of entrepreneurship. The following chart displays what stages of company development other organizations and businesses focus on and how we work together to provide entrepreneurs with many avenues to access services and customize their entrepreneurial journey. Recognizing that by working together to seamlessly support*

companies in Lethbridge, our collaboration today will contribute to a bright and diversified economic future" (RINSA October 10, 2018 Progress Report p. 9)

While RINSA's goals have broadly remained the same, as discussed in the next chapter the clients and population groups that its programs target have increased (RINSA, 2021e).

Figure 4: Initial chart that describes RINSA partner roles and contributions to support an innovation ecosystem in Southern Alberta

Economic Development Lethbridge	University of Lethbridge	Lethbridge College	Alberta Innovates	Community Futures	NRC-IRAP	Blood Tribe Economic Development	SouthGrow Regional Initiative	Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance
• Operates Tecconnect, centre of excellence for entrepreneurship & Innovation • Business incubator and entrepreneurial training centre	• Intellectual Property, Commercialization & Licensing • Entreinvestor [TM] Training Program	• Industry-focused applied research projects	• Support commercialization & grow new ventures • Find solutions, develops products & assists in moving technologies to market	• Business services, loans & funding • Annual Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge	• Funding & advisory services • Industrial Research Assistance Program (IRAP)	• Development of private, public and corporate enterprises and initiatives that build a self-sustaining economy	• Economic development alliance of 27 south central Alberta communities	• Economic development collaboration among 16 vibrant rural communities

Partly as a result of the networked, organic, approach that defines RINSA, both in its early days but also in its more recent practice, a number of interviews commented on the challenges of governance, leadership and organizational structure. These comments were often in the context of being inevitable but nevertheless are important to note. For example, the vast majority of key informants addressed the issue of leadership as it pertains to RINSA. Many noted that RINSA did not have one identifiable leader. Despite this challenge, multiple partners and clients noted that there was a continuity and sustainability evident in the way that the network was ran and in how the original intent remains intact today. As one interviewee stated: *"Part of the challenge is we've got an administrator, so we have a program manager that's funded by Alberta Innovates through RINSA, but there's not an actual human that manages RINSA. That's the beauty of it, but that's the Achilles heel."*

This approach to networked leadership, did have consequences on governance of RINSA. As one partner stated, ambiguity in leadership in the past have led to misunderstandings and confusion on the roles of staff-members. This led, in the view of some interviewees, to an overabundance of disorganized communication that resulted from a disconnect between the various organizations that form the staff arm of the RIN. This, as a number of interviews noted, meant that meetings held between partners, stakeholders, and clients were deemed essential to maintain communication, collaboration, and engagement throughout the network, not least as there was a tendency for competition to arise at times between the partners. One of the challenges with running a network is the inevitable conflicts that occur between its members, but both stakeholders and partners note that they have always managed to work through these challenges together. While some stakeholders note that regular meetings allow more people to attend due to differing schedules, others state that having too many meetings becomes cumbersome and leads to a decrease in engagement. On the other hand, several stakeholders and partners state that regular meetings with network leadership present are critical in order to keep up with the ever-changing landscape.

One of the essential aspects of governance, which was addressed by most key informants, was funding (which is covered in the next section). Putting that important fiduciary responsibility to one side, many foundational stakeholders highlighted the evolution of RINSA's governance and organizational structures, and the adaptability of RINSA to make those changes. Some stakeholders noted how their roles have become more defined in recent years, whereas, in the beginning, everyone did a little bit of everything. The effectiveness of RINSA's governance was echoed by multiple key informants. For example, one stakeholder noted that because of the way RINSA structures its governance, everybody is equal, everybody has a voice, and everybody gets a chance to speak. Although RINSA has relied on this collaborative attitude since its inception, some partners and clients worry that the network has become more bureaucratic in recent years, which has created barriers for collaboration and accessibility.

Despite these legitimate concerns about the future, many key informants took the time to note that they see RINSA as the most successful RIN in the province. They stated that although there have been challenges along the way, RINSA tended to serve as a model for other RINs that may have had a harder time achieving similar results. The collaborative aspect of the network was often mentioned as the main reason behind RINSA's success. One foundational stakeholder specifies that the motto "No entrepreneur left behind" was the primary ideal from the very beginning.

The financial investments in RINSA are relatively modest but do not take into consideration hours contributed to the network by partner organization staff

RINSA executed four granting agreements with Alberta Innovates between 2011 and 2022. The first agreement lasted more than three years and covered the period from October 2011 to March 2015 (EDL, 2019a). RINSA was allocated $1,351,000 for this period. This agreement with Alberta Innovates had three main partners: EDL, the University of Lethbridge, and Lethbridge College. EDL received a one-time investment of $250,000 in the 2010-11 fiscal year to compliment federal and municipal funding to provide organizational startup funding, e.g., office and meeting space equipment for the Tecconnect centre. RINSA received 40% more funding during the last three-year agreement, April 2019 to March 2022 than the initial four-year agreement that ran from October 2011 to March 2015.

Table 1, shows the budget allocated between 2011-12 and 2019-2022, which covers all four grant agreements.

Table 1: RINSA budget (October 2011- March 2022)

	Agreement or Amendment Amount	Total
October 1, 2011 to September 30, 2014	$1,216,000	
Amended for Sept 30 2014 - March 31 2015	$135,000	$1,351,000
April 1, 2015 - March 31 2016	$292,000	292,000
April 1, 2016 - March 31, 2019	$948,000	$948,000
April 1, 2019 - March 31, 2022	$1,355,000	
Amended January 2020 for April 1, 2019 - March 31, 2022	$215,000	$1,570,000
Amended February 2021 for April 1, 2019 - March 31, 2022	$325,000	$1,895,000
Total investment		**$4,486,000**

In 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 additional funding for the Alberta Entrepreneurship Incubator (AEI) program of $400,000 (covering both years) was delivered by RINSA.

RINSA expenditures can be grouped into four categories: Technology Development Advisory, Research Support, Business Development Advisory and general program expenses. Over the period 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, an average of 50% of RINSA expenditures went towards business development advisory services compared to 2017-2018 and 2018-2019, where an average of 58% of funding went to research support.

Evolution of the socioeconomic and political context

The development of RINSA over its 10 years has to be set against a changing context – both in broader political and social trends but also in the way innovation is supported and funded in the region. As already noted, since 2011, the Government of Alberta (GOA) has reiterated a number of times its commitment to support entrepreneurship in Alberta. The 2018-2021 business plan of the Department of Economic Development and Trade (now the Department of Jobs, Economy and Innovation) stated that supporting new businesses, entrepreneurs, innovation, and commercialization were one of its priorities. Notably, innovation was identified as a key element in

its strategy to foster job creation and sustainable growth (Alberta Department of Economic Development and Trade, 2018).

A specific example of this was that in 2019, the federal Minister of Small Business and Export Promotion announced that EDL would receive an envelope of $1.68 million over three years as part of the federal Women Entrepreneurship Strategy (EDL, 2019a). With this funding EDL created the Women Entrepreneurship-in-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematic) or WESTEM program – described in more detail in the next chapter. It translates the federal government's intent to develop a STEM-centric community of practice and a collaborative network of women from the science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields. Through EDL, RINSA formed new strategic partnerships and supported a variety of initiatives to support women entrepreneurs (RINSA, 2020a, 2020d, 2021c).

Concurrent with the federal policy changes, at a provincial level in 2016, the four Alberta Innovates corporations – Bio Solutions, Energy and the Environment Solutions, Health Solutions, and Technology Futures – were merged into a single entity. In the wake of this consolidation, a new mandate was developed for the organization (Alberta Innovates, 2017). Notably, Alberta Innovates moved towards an outcomes-oriented and market-driven approach, whereby tangible outcomes are pursued, and market and user needs are prioritized. The new mandate also highlighted the importance of collaborations and coordinated efforts that involve Alberta's various research and innovation stakeholders. Alberta Innovates' consolidation did not alter the organization's overall goal of developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem in Alberta (Alberta Innovates, 2017). This objective is clearly stated in both the 2015-18 and 2018-21 business plans. While support for commercialization and market entry remained a constant aim, the 2018-21 plan broadened the scope of that goal and emphasized the importance of enhancing the knowledge workforce and talent pool through the acquisition of entrepreneurial skills and businesses with an emphasis on technology. None of this changing mandate was a direct threat to RINSA as it was pretty much aligned, but did result in an extended list of metrics to measure (Alberta Innovates, 2017, 2020a).

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an unsurprising impact on RINSA and this impact case study

Like throughout the world, the COVID-19 pandemic affected the economy in Alberta and significantly slowed down business activity, making it particularly difficult for SMEs. In this context, the RINs proved to be useful in pooling information and resources to help SMEs with their immediate needs (Alberta Innovates, 2020b). In 2020, RINSA and its members developed various resources to support the local and regional business community. EDL supported the Lethbridge & Region Economic Recovery Task Force, a locally coordinated task force that looked at better aligning resources to get southern Alberta's economy back on track (RINSA, 2020d). Tecconnect experienced an increase in activity and service delivery, which was facilitated by virtual and video conferencing technologies (RINSA, 2020d).

Even as support to SMEs and entrepreneurs was provided, the crisis also had negative impacts on RINSA and its members. The various partners involved in RINSA indicated that the COVID-19 crisis had affected their programing, often resulting in the cancellation of in-person events and workshops. The general observation is that online events do not have the same traction as in-person ones, and attendance tends to be lower online (EDL, 2020b; RINSA, 2020d). The University of Lethbridge reported a substantial decline in financial support for innovation and entrepreneurship as pandemic-related issues changed funding priorities. Tecconnect had to rethink how its space could be utilized. With health restrictions and remote working, Tecconnect could no longer play its role of provider of office space for start-up entrepreneurs. As a result, the centre has been considering revisiting its plan to develop co-working spaces (RINSA, 2020d). While they might no longer need

full-time office space, some clients have expressed the desire to have meeting or work spaces on a part-time basis (EDL, 2020b). RINSA reports noted that funding for program activities had to be re-positioned as a result of a limited ability to conduct in-person events (RINSA, 2021e). Of rather less significance, the pandemic also impacted on the development of this impact case study, requiring the majority of data to be collected remotely via Zoom interviews and online workshops. Whilst we do not consider this to be a major risk to the overall assessment, it may be that with more sensitive topics in person interviews would have prompted a more nuanced and critical response.

Concluding reflections

This chapter has illustrated the unique context within which RINSA was founded and developed over the past 10 years. The geo-social environment of southern Alberta creates a number of challenges for supporting a vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem, but these have largely been overcome by the deep-seated trusted relationships and associated social capital that existed between the founding partners along with the ability to adapt both RINSA's core mission and ways of working over the past decade. A separate RINSA Timeline Narrative highlighting some key global, federal, provincial, and local context that influenced and aided RINSA's evolution over the years is located in Appendix F.

Chapter 3: RINSA established a number of programs to support the local entrepreneurial ecosystem in southern Alberta

As illustrated in the previous chapter, RINSA successfully brought together a diverse range of partners and collaborators in a changing and at times challenging context. This chapter builds on the realist framework adopted for the ICS by examining the suite of mechanisms that RINSA has developed which contribute to the overall outcomes described in the next chapter. It is important to acknowledge that through this realist framing we are not looking to establish causation between the interventions (as described in this chapter) and the outcomes (described in the next) but *how* the programs offered by RINSA are used and interpreted in different ways by different people in different contexts creating different cultures. It is understanding how those context and mechanisms influence one another that is at the heart of a realist evaluation and from that interaction how that contributes to the outcomes.[24]

For example, the 'network building' described in the previous chapter was to a degree organic but somehow maintained the inherent level of trust, understanding and friendships that has been characteristic of RINSA's success over the past decade. In addition to the formal partners a number of unfunded affiliates, including two Indigenous-run economic development agencies - Piikani Resource Development and Blood Tribe Economic Development - received funding and support as part of the RINSA partnership (RINSA, 2020d, 2021e) along with others including Alberta Southwest Regional Alliance, SouthGrow Regional Economic Development, Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce, National Research Council of Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program (NRC IRAP), Community Futures Lethbridge Region, Alberta Innovates, and Town of Okotoks Economic Development (RINSA, 2021e). As we will see in this chapter, it is this inclusive evolution that shaped what RINSA actually does, responding to client needs as and when necessary, resulting in a range of different interventions, activities and services to assist local companies and entrepreneurs. At the same time this responsiveness has led to a diversity of activity that can come across as disparate and confused to clients, especially as they do not necessarily connect specific programs or interventions to RINSA.

According to the key informants interviewed for the ICS, in the first years of existence, RINSA slowly found a 'way of working' with its founding partners, each taking on different activities, but at times overlapping, duplicating, and perhaps competing implicitly with one another. Examples provided include, RINSA assisted companies through client-related events and programs as well as providing non-funded support and advisory services to various clients (Lethbridge College, 2013). Likewise, Tecconnect's original RINSA-funded activities also involved the provision of full service to clients, which includes training, support, and networking opportunities. The University of Lethbridge originally planned to use RINSA funds to help entrepreneurial students and faculty members start and grow their own businesses. But it also helped companies get funding, as well as introducing them to RINSA partners, and securing a business consultant to develop business plans (Lethbridge College, 2015) – which to a degree duplicated the role of the Technology Development Advisor (TDA).

However, the activities delivered, supported, or sponsored by RINSA have greatly evolved over the past 10 years, with more clarity on the different roles the founding partners assumed. Whilst, the original activities are still ongoing, new partners, programs, activities, and collaborations were

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[24] http://ramesesproject.org/media/RAMESES_II_What_is_a_mechanism.pdf

added, including targeted specific population groups as discussed in the next section.[25] RINSA and its members introduced a number of new programs and activities, including the following:

- *EDL/Tecconnect Education on Demand* – Tecconnect has launched an Education on Demand platform, whereby entrepreneurs can build their skills through accessing past sessions that Tecconnect has made available. Notably, the Entrepreneurship 101 - Foundations Module is a recorded webinar that was made available so that stakeholders can experience the content and skills training from the comfort of their home or office. More content continues to be posted on the Tecconnect website (RINSA, 2020d)

- *Alberta Entrepreneurship Incubator Program* – Between 2017 and 2019, RINSA delivered AI's Alberta Entrepreneurship Incubator Program (AEI) with EDL as the fiscal agent and Tecconnect as the delivery portal. The program focused on accelerating the entry and growth of new entrepreneurial businesses with innovative ideas and potential products; increasing the number of jobs in Alberta; and encouraging recent graduates and those individuals who are unemployed due to the current economic downturn, to consider entrepreneurship as a potential career path (EDL, 2018).

- *The Agility Program* – The University of Lethbridge launched the Agility program to support students in developing early phase innovations and prototypes. There is now an Agility Innovation Zone; a space designed as a flexible workspace for students to work in teams and bring their ideas to life (RINSA, 2019b). In addition, the University created a structured accelerator program, called Trailblazing, to guide early-stage entrepreneurs through the ideation and validation process (RINSA, 2021e).

- *The Pivot* – Lethbridge College launched its student incubator in September 2019. The Pivot is the central hub for entrepreneurial activity on the college's campus. It is the home of the AgENT program, hosting all workshops and events, and simultaneously acts as an incubator for student start-ups (RINSA, 2019c, 2021e).

- *A team of business advisors* – RINSA developed a team of interdisciplinary business advisors whose knowledge and expertise cover business management, processing, blockchain, accounting, coaching, social media, social enterprise, franchising and marketing and more. (EDL, 2019a; RINSA, 2018). This team enriched the workshop offerings with one-on-one coaching and the provision of advice that boosted the growth of many local startups. The team facilitated the blurring of the lines between the various funded programs, so that the client can have a seamless experience (EDL, 2019a). It is worth noting that other programs, such as WESTEM (below), also had business advisors targeted to women entrepreneurs and whilst they were separate people they may well be advising the same client.

- *WESTEM* – The Women Entrepreneurs-in-STEM Program empowers, supports, and trains women entrepreneurs in southern Alberta. This program specializes in working with women interested in developing innovative companies related to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields, with a focus on integrating emerging technologies into their businesses. The Program was created through funding from the Government of Canada's Women Entrepreneurship Strategy and delivered by Economic Development Lethbridge/Tecconnect. It focuses on advancing gender, rural-urban, and racial equality in entrepreneurialism. This is achieved by supporting under-represented women in rural and remote regions of southern Alberta and creating a female-based community of practice and a highly collaborative and streamlined networks.

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[25] *https://rinsa.ca/resources/*

- *New Canadian Emerging Entrepreneurs Program* – A series of workshops designed to support women entrepreneurs who are new Canadians in a supportive and safe environment.

- *Entrepreneurial Educators of Alberta* – Continues to be a community of practice that is currently led largely by Olds College and University of Lethbridge. Lethbridge College has maintained its involvement in a support role, primarily by managing the monthly newsletter in which all post-secondaries share their early-stage entrepreneur events with each other to encourage cross-institutional attendance. EEA has renewed its funding with ISEE and is moving ahead with training for strategy planning and mentor development, as requested by the community. This research and work was led by University of Lethbridge. The focus of this group remains bringing together post-secondary educators and centres that support innovation and entrepreneurship.

- *The Business Model Canvas (BMC) and Value Proposition Design (VPD)* – Were introduced to RINSA by Renae Barlow who trained to be a Master Facilitator in 2016. The Business Model Canvas (BMC) is a pre-business plan strategic management tool to define and communicate a business idea or concept. It is a one-page document/canvas which works through the fundamental elements of a business or product, structuring an idea in a coherent way. The Value Proposition Design (VPD) is a plug-in tool to the BMC as a framework to ensure that there is a fit between the product and market.

When discussing the services available within RINSA, interviewees had very positive views of the programs they were exposed to. Many clients said that the programs and events they participated in were very helpful. For example, one interviewee noted that the current program structure, helps entrepreneurs find more advanced training such as pre-business plan/ideation development tools, the self-directed series, and the variety of panel topics. Additionally, if an entrepreneur needs more advice after that, they are able to engage with a business advisor with expertise in the area they need. Other interviewees shared a similarly positive view, with different clients all expressing the value they found in different programs. This included the Women Entrepreneurs-in-STEM Program, Tecconnect, various workshops and networking events, and the incubator program. One incubator program client mentioned that when they had a baby, a changing table was put in Tecconnect for them. They were really grateful for that and said it allowed them to go through their meetings easily, which allowed her to get connected to other partners in the ecosystem – "*That was a huge deal for me. That meant a lot.*"

A number of interviewees made suggestions for future programs including, for example, reinstating and expanding the Job Shadow Program, where students shadow someone at their job for the day to see and experience what they do. Another client thought that there should be fewer workshops and theory-based programs, and more services that focus on getting entrepreneurs funds for specific objectives. They explained that there is too much focus on education and not enough on pre-application. Finally, a different client noted that in their experience as a mentor, they often found themselves matched with entrepreneurs who had not done the basic prep-work to ensure that their project was even feasible. The client added that they thought there should be more effort put into qualifying a prospect before being handed to mentors.

The indistinct relationship between RINSA, Tecconnect and TDAs causes confusion, but does that matter?

One of the interesting observations coming out of the interviews is how clients – understandably – conflate services provided by RINSA, Tecconnect and TDAs. To a degree that should not matter as the end point of any intervention should be on strengthening the entrepreneur's ecosystem in southern Alberta. Nevertheless, in the context of assessing the impact of RINSA it raises a methodological challenge as to who is accountable for the various interventions, and from a delivery viewpoint it does raise a risk of duplication of activity and potentially client confusion.

To be specific, and to reiterate, Tecconnect is in Lethbridge and is a business incubator that was originally funded through Economic Development Lethbridge by the City of Lethbridge corporation, federal funding and private investment. It is a physical space where entrepreneurs can start and grow their businesses. Tecconnect is a key partner within RINSA and though that partnership will host RINSA services within its space, such as training and other events. However, even though RINSA is virtual in as much as it is a regional network, it is likely that a client could attend a RINSA event that is hosted at Tecconnect, although RINSA will also host events at other locations in the field. TDAs are funded and employed by Alberta Innovates – which also funds RINSA and Tecconnect – to assist SMEs in navigating the innovation ecosystem and to provide expert technology development advice to improve the likelihood of successful development and commercialization of the product or service. Ten TDA's are located across Alberta, including one that is in the City of Lethbridge and has offices at Tecconnect, the University and the College. So again, whilst the TDA is inextricably linked to both RINSA and Tecconnect, from a formal accountability viewpoint the role is independent of both.

It is thus not surprising that one the most salient themes that came up during the interviews was the relationship between Tecconnect, RINSA and TDAs. One interview captured the difference quite nicely by saying:

> *"So again, RINs are the network. They're that connectivity piece. Our metrics moved in the last funding round as well to be less centred on jobs and revenues of these companies, which is a very specific measurement for accelerators when you're up at that end of the scale, but it's not the right measure for when you're creating that network and that ecosystem. So, it's those ecosystem measures that will still be the responsibility of the RINs in terms of connectivity, density."*

This nuanced understanding was, however, a minority view with a main challenge identified by the majority of key informants being a general lack of awareness of what Tecconnect, RINSA and TDAs roles are. This can lead to a duplication of services, which in itself could be inefficient, as well as raising issues of communications and 'branding'. This is a point that is picked up in the final chapter, but it is worth noting that one partner suggested RINSA and Tecconnect could create tailored and joint communication or as another interviewee put it *"I don't think everybody needs to know everything all the time."*

RINSA's commitment to EDI from its outset has been one of its stand-out achievements

RINSA is seen as a pioneer in equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in Alberta by many interviewees, and for that is highly respected by others in the province. RINSA was applauded by many of those interviewed for their initiative - *"When RINSA sees a gap for under-represented groups they work to find the appropriate services and help to address it."*

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RINSA had a focus on EDI from its foundation, but in recent years has formalized that in supporting various programs, initiatives, and partnerships that focus on underrepresented populations (RINSA, 2020d, 2020d, 2021c, 2021e). For example, in 2019, RINSA acknowledged existing gaps and a lack of resources and programming for Indigenous peoples, women, immigrants, and newcomers, as it relates to STEM-related businesses and emerging technologies (RINSA, 2018). The 2019 progress report introduced targeted metrics in RINSA's annual performance goals. The network thus must report the number of events focused on, or with increased accessibility for, underrepresented groups (RINSA, 2019b). A total of 184 such events took place during the 2020-21 fiscal year (RINSA, 2020d, 2021c). RINSA developed incubator programs targeted at Indigenous peoples, immigrants, and women, but also for populations living in rural or remote areas (RINSA, 2020d, 2021c). As one interviewee put it:

> *"They don't mess around down in Lethbridge. They come up with these things like WESTEM, involving the Indigenous and First Nations communities, and helping immigrant groups and then they do them. And that's the community spirit that they have. That's absolutely outstanding! The fact that they're doing that is outstanding. The fact that they're institutionalizing and making it programming and programmable, I think is outstanding! I think the rest of the community, and honestly, even the rest of the province and government can learn from that kind of stuff because we're so far behind on EDI and ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) right now, it just doesn't seem to be a priority for us yet, but we're getting there. I applaud anybody that can make that work and it takes special people to do it. So good for them."*

As described in more detail below, a key byproduct of all the EDI services RINSA provides is to empower the members of under-represented groups; build confidence as their business acumen increases.

> *"It can be challenging to be able to make yourself heard because sometimes people have these preconceived notions and that's the way that they treat you. It's hard to get outside of stereotypes and get away from someone's perception of you before they've even met you… The services for under-represented groups, such as Indigenous and immigrant women, empowers them with the right questions to ask."*

> *"We also help our WESTEM Business Advisors get better and more confident in the services they provide."*

RINSA takes their role and responsibility to provide services to under-represented groups very seriously – this is evident in not just the breadth and depth of services they provide, but they are also a role model for the other RINs. As a number of interviewees noted other RINs are eager to learn about RINSA's approach, lessons learned, and successes as one. One of the lessons from the RINSA approach, is to have tailored interventions for different under-represented groups as discussed in more detail below.

Indigenous peoples

RINSA is viewed as a very successful organization with regard to engaging with, supporting, and helping to advance the local Indigenous/First Nations entrepreneurs (and by extension, communities). The significant success RINSA has had with gaining the trust, involvement, and friendship with the local Indigenous/First Nations groups is seen as *"tremendously valuable", "It's a lengthy process. It doesn't happen overnight. It's something that you have to work at consistently*

and build trust, build a relationship, build that vulnerability and that peace, that's very important for both parties at the table because I know that there are these great resources out there."

One of the first steps towards increased equitable representation of Indigenous peoples' perspectives in RINSA was the inclusion of representatives from the Piikani Resource Development and Blood Tribe Economic Development in the management team and the decision-making process. In 2019, RINSA was the only RIN to have active Indigenous participation in its regular meetings (EDL, 2019a).

Today, RINSA is funding or supporting the following initiatives aimed at Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem including:

- *RINSA Fund for Indigenous Entrepreneur Programming and Development* – Since 2019, the network funds the development of Indigenous entrepreneur programming, which involves both Piikani Resource Development and Blood Tribe Economic Development (RINSA, 2019c).

- *Indigenous Youth Entrepreneurship program* – Tecconnect partners with Blood Tribe Economic Development and hosts a group of Indigenous student youth to discuss entrepreneurship and ideation. The youth are presented with the various supports, services, and offerings available to Indigenous entrepreneurs through RINSA programs and other EDL/Tecconnect based pathways (RINSA, 2020d, 2021c).

- *An Indigenous Business Advisor at Tecconnect* – In 2019, Tecconnect partnered with Business Link to create an *Indigenous Business Advisor* role at Tecconnect. Both organizations covered half of this advisor's salary. The Indigenous Business Advisor provides business advice on a number of topics including general entrepreneurship and workshops on various topics, including finances, human resources, and funding. The role is meant to help create a connectivity with Indigenous stakeholders in the southwestern Alberta region (EDL, 2019a).

- *Indigenous Entrepreneur Summit* – In 2018, in partnership with Business Link Indigenous Services, Tecconnect hosted the first Indigenous Entrepreneur Summit, a day-long event for Indigenous entrepreneurs. More than 25 entrepreneurs from Kainai and Piikani Nations participated in this first summit. Tecconnect and Business Link still partner to organize the summit (RINSA, 2018).

- *Partnership with the Indigenous community* – Over the years, RINSA engaged in partnerships with surrounding Indigenous communities of Treaty 7. Notably, Tecconnect and RINSA are key members of the Indigenous Resource Group, which includes Treaty 7 members of Kainai, Piikani, Stoney, Siksika and Tsue T'ina Nations. The Indigenous Resource Group facilitates participation in multiple events (RINSA, 2018, 2019b, 2020a, 2020d).

- *Indigenous Technology Incubator Program* – This program is co-facilitated by a Tecconnect Business Advisor of Indigenous background and the RINSA Entrepreneur Program Manager (RINSA, 2021c, 2021e).

In addition to these recurring activities, RINSA partners with Piikani and Blood Tribe First Nations representation (through Alberta Entrepreneur Incubator – AEI - program) to create programs for Indigenous peoples both on and off reservations. Indigenous entrepreneurs are also encouraged to leverage the various programs delivered by RINSA and its partners in events such as the Indigenous Education Training workshop that was offered in recognition of 2021's National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (RINSA, 2019a). Among other things, the workshop discussed the current and historic

lived realities and experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada. The event was open to clients, advisors, and community members from our RINSA region and beyond (RINSA, 2021e).

Many of RINSA's partners and other community services providers report that prior to RINSA they had tried to engage with the local Indigenous/First Nations groups with little success. However, the significant and continued efforts of RINSA with embracing and honouring the local Indigenous/First Nations communities, customs, and cultures has earned RINSA respect from these groups (and the larger community), which has (and continues to) enrich all of southern Alberta. As one interview put it:

> *"We tried and we tried and we tried to get engagement from our local Indigenous and First Nations groups. And there are wonderful people there who are doing great things, but honestly, they are spread so thin that I feel like we hadn't figured out how we can make ourselves more important to their lives so that they wanted to engage with us. RINSA has had more success than a lot of other groups in that engagement. I've seen the Piikani and Blood Tribe resource development people more often at a RINSA meeting than I have at other kinds of things that are going on. So that tells me that RINSA offers something that is unique and relevant to the Indigenous and First Nation groups as they are supporting their entrepreneurs. RINSA is a forum to connect. It's never as robust as we want it to be, but I respect the fact that they (Indigenous communities) have a lot of issues in their own community and leadership and their resources are stretched very thin, but they are making the effort with RINSA. That says a lot!"*

A sentiment echoed and built on by another of the interviewees:

> *"I remember being at a meeting with a Chief from one of the Indigenous communities and he talked about how they were becoming self-sufficient. They didn't want any government money. They are very entrepreneurial, business-like, open for business. So, it's really through the work of Renae who really started to turn attention in a more formal way. By formal, I mean putting money where our mouth was, in Indigenous entrepreneurs. The Indigenous communities have some strong entrepreneurs. I think recognizing that you can focus energy and direct your attention to those communities and invite those people in is great. And I think that's fantastic that RINSA did that and continues to do that. The downside, or the one thing we have to be careful of is that you don't get classified as, 'Well, there's all these entrepreneurs and then there's the Indigenous entrepreneurs.' They are all entrepreneurs, and we are levelling the playing field for them."*

Women entrepreneurs

> *"With women in WESTEM now, it's pretty cool that you've got women who've worked with women in it, and it'd be great when the Indigenous and when the new immigrants can blend together, because they can see it through different lenses, compared to where I come from and my privileged opportunities that I've had."*
> *— interviewee.*

Another socio-demographic group that RINSA focused on supporting was women entrepreneurs. RINSA's documentation indicates that many of the women entrepreneurs who are supported through Tecconnect were struggling to determine where they should get started (RINSA, 2020c). RINSA funding and support is provided through a number of initiatives to help women entrepreneurs including the Women Entrepreneur in STEM Program (WESTEM) and Southern Alberta Women in Business (SAWIB). WESTEM is part of the federal Women Entrepreneurship Strategy, through which EDL received $1.68 million in funding between 2019 and 2022 for Women Entrepreneurs-in-STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) training, mentoring and other entrepreneurial support programs through its Tecconnect centre. WESTEM aims to address the geographic disadvantage for women in Lethbridge when it comes to pursuing STEM-related entrepreneurial ventures and accessing opportunities and local support networks. Part of the funding is directed at reducing the costs of learning opportunities for women

entrepreneurs (EDL, 2019a). In 2020, WESTEM had over 200 clients in event and coaching programs (EDL, 2020b) – 80 per cent of those women have gone on to create companies. The other 20 per cent had existing companies that they either pivoted or re-validated to grow and scale.

The respondents interviewed all agreed that the WESTEM program is highly valuable to not only women entrepreneurs in southern Alberta, but to the entrepreneurial ecosystem across the province:

> "WESTEM brings tremendous value. I think it's creating a really unique and special forum for learning and sharing ideas and really highlighting southern Alberta and more generally Alberta as a place where this is an important thing to do. I see that as being an amazing program! We know it's there and can refer people to it and sing its praises."

Or as another interviewee suggested:

> "Women in STEM tend to be very hard to find, we're very underground unless you build this community. And then we're very loud and excited. I think that is the main draw. Of course, the content is good and having it focused on women. Even though the content realistically is the same, it gives you a safe space where you don't feel intimidated, you don't have to feel 'dumb' compared to your male peers who generally have more exposure to STEM fields just coming into those programs. So, it can be a little bit intimidating."

Keeping in mind the intersectionality of EDI, it is worth mentioning that the WESTEM program delivers several projects that aim at developing programming for rural, remote, Indigenous, and immigrant women entrepreneurs. Those interviewed report that, generally, all women in STEM are more challenged than their male counterparts. Of particular note are Indigenous and immigrant women in areas of STEM who have (and continue to face) significant challenges in getting into business. WESTEM is a highly valuable support service for this demographic because it not only provides them with opportunities to learn basic business acumen, but it also helps to build business and personal confidences, facilitates the creation of a community support system *("women supporting women through programs such as the Blackfoot Women Entrepreneurship Program that is very grassroots"),* and contributes to the advancement of STEM. WESTEM is viewed as a valuable mechanism to *"blend together the three most disadvantaged groups in business: women, Indigenous and immigrant entrepreneurs."* For instance, WESTEM supported the development of a program specific to women Indigenous entrepreneurs with women organizers from Siksika, Blood Tribe, and Piikani, and creation of a program dedicated to a cohort of women entrepreneurs who are new Canadians (RINSA, 2021e).

In addition to WESTEM the other regional initiative focused on women entrepreneurs is the Southern Alberta Women in Business (SAWIB). Starting out as a group dedicated to the establishment of a culture of education, it provides mentorship and networking opportunities to support women in all areas and stages of business. The group became a non-profit organization in 2019 and counts more than 100 members. It is worth mentioning that RINSA members the University of Lethbridge, Community Futures Lethbridge Region, and Lethbridge College partnered with SAWIB to deliver the Women Entrepreneur Evening to highlight female entrepreneurs (EDL, 2019a, 2019b, RINSA, 2020b). Another example of partnership involved Tecconnect and The 51, which is a platform to access women-led capital for women-led businesses. This partnership is meant to help southern Alberta female entrepreneurs find and achieve investment opportunities (RINSA, 2021e). The University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College also partnered with the Canadian Association of Farm Advisors (CAFA) to offer a one-day Family Farm Forum conference that connected providers and focused on women in agriculture (RINSA, 2020b).

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Immigrants and newcomers

RINSA also supports specific initiatives to increase the participation of immigrant and newcomer entrepreneurs. Notably, the Immigrant Entrepreneur Program focuses on the expansion of immigrant centric entrepreneurship, particularly in innovative technologies (RINSA, 2020a, 2020d). Tecconnect partners with Business Link, which received a provincial grant to deliver the program across the province, and hosts events and sessions targeted at immigrant populations. Tecconnect also partnered with Business Link for other events, like the Immigrant Entrepreneur Summit (RINSA, 2021c). Tecconnect offers the New Canadian Technology Incubator Program, which is specifically designed for newcomers (RINSA, 2021c, 2021e).

Remote and rural communities

Remote and rural populations also have historically low entrepreneurial representation. RINSA acknowledged that most of RINSA's programs and supports were centralized in Lethbridge. As a result, rural entrepreneurs and business mentors have limited access to RINSA's resource and are often not included in the conversations (RINSA, 2021a). In 2019, Tecconnect upgraded its audio-visual system. The new system is able to provide high-end delivery of programming and meetings through webinar and online conferencing. This development facilitated the delivery of workshops to rural and remote entrepreneurs who might otherwise not have been able to participate in the programming and services offered at the Tecconnect centre (EDL, 2019a, 2020b). This forward thinking significantly contributed to the success of the continuance of programs during the COVID pandemic. Tecconnect, in partnership with Business Link, launched a pilot project to disseminate entrepreneurship education through video conferencing in several libraries across the region in response to the lack of broadband access in rural/remote areas. Participants could attend an eight-week program in a library to learn about specific business topics. The project confirmed the need for rural and remote entrepreneur training workshops and coaching (EDL, 2019a). One interviewee noted that when COVID settles down and people can gather again, it was suggested to spend more time in the rural and remote areas – bring the services out to the remote areas for the under-represented groups where internet is sparce while they wait for provincial and federal funding to accelerate broadband access in rural/remote areas.This was done to some degree prior to COVID, but key stakeholders believe that the in-person approach is respected and highly valued by those with limited access to larger centres and the conveniences found there (e.g., easy access to internet).

RINSA recognized that there had been a clear need for programs for the above-mentioned groups, and that the demand for such supports was also very high. However, the network is exploring the idea of creating additional programs for other underrepresented groups like junior entrepreneurs, Black entrepreneurs, seniorpreneurs, and LGBTQ2S+ (RINSA, 2021e). For example, some of those interviewed discussed the inclusion of programming to help junior entrepreneurs (elementary, middle, and high school students), especially those from the Indigenous/First Nations communities, females, and immigrants. Others mentioned the amazing value of Junior Achievement Southern Alberta and their Indigenous program - Community Futures Treaty Seven *("Things like Junior Achievement that has done some great programming to introduce entrepreneurship to youth in elementary and middle school.")*

Similarly, it was noted that there was a likely demand to provide services specific to the needs of seniors (of any culture). For example, simple introductions to computers and other technologies that will help senior-lead businesses grow as well as exploring additional ways to involve people with disabilities in service delivery and/or receipt of services that ensure they are able to access the resources in a way that is most appropriate for them.

Notwithstanding these successes RINSA, and more broadly the entrepreneurial ecosystem in southern Alberta, faces a number of significant 'wicked problems'

Several operational challenges that RINSA faces have already been identified including, for example, the red-tape, short term funding cycle and branding. However, there are also a number of more strategic challenges which are more inherent to stewarding an entrepreneurial ecosystem in the context of a rural economy like southern Alberta. These challenges are 'wicked' in as much as there is no obvious solution to them although they need to be managed and mitigated as much as possible. A wicked problem "has innumerable causes, is tough to describe, and doesn't have a right answer."[26] Three sets of wicked problems were identified in the interviews – labour shortages, the scaling up of business, and the implications of COVID.

Labour and talent shortages

A common issue identified by stakeholder, partners, and clients was that of a significant labour shortage across many industries, which ranges from unskilled workers to middle-management and executive-level positions. Often businesses found that the employees they could find did not have the skills or experience necessary for the job. One stakeholder stated that they have heard many experiences from companies that cannot find the expertise they need in southern Alberta or, in some cases, all of Alberta. They explained that they heard from an entrepreneur who struggled hiring graduates from the University of Lethbridge as they did not have the experience needed, that is they are not 'work ready' in the jargon. This is backed up by similar experiences shared by clients where one stated that there is a 50/50 chance of whether or not hiring a young graduate works out. The stakeholder went on to say that students do not have the experience they need, and there are not enough trainers available to give them that experience.

Multiple stakeholders emphasized that there is a shortage of skilled CEOs and salespeople. One stakeholder noted that in their experience speaking with entrepreneurs, the vast majority of the time they were not lacking cash but were lacking skilled salespeople. These entrepreneurs had the technical skills to create their product, but not the skills to run their business or market it. This idea was also expressed by both partners and clients, with one partner saying that there is no shortage of marketing people to generate demand, but a distinct lack of salespeople to capitalize on that demand.

Multiple partners noted that rural communities are suffering from brain drain and are facing challenges to fill skilled positions. One partner explained that often people will just take a rural position temporarily to gain experience and then move to the city once they've gained that experience. A client also anecdotally noted that much of their previous work crew no longer works in Alberta. If they do, they often are working remotely for out-of-province companies.

Interviewees also emphasized a number of other factors that impose constraints on local businesses to hire the talent they need, and on employees to get the relevant skills they need. Entrepreneurs often do not have the resources to hire exactly who they like, and many clients expressed the limited opportunities for students to learn skills and gain experience. One stakeholder noted that startups often do not have the luxury of being able to train employees and need people who can begin immediately. However, as one client described, it is very difficult to get the experienced personnel they need because they cannot pay what they cost. Another client stated that low wages are an issue in Alberta as it leads to a lot of the talent leaving for places like the United States, which is only likely to increase as work gets more virtual.

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[26] Camillus (2008). Strategy as a wicked problem. Harvard Business Review. May 2008. https://hbr.org/2008/05/strategy-as-a-wicked-problem.

Interviewees also shared some opportunities they have explored to mitigate the challenges posed by workforce shortages and the other constraints they described. To help address the labour shortage, one client stated that they applied for Alberta Innovates' Commercialization Associates Program, which helps pay for the salary of a commercialization expert. Another client explained that they developed an in-house training program to promote people internally, as well as an apprenticeship program with their local schools to expose students to their company and the trades in general. Further, a RINSA partner stated that they requested $7.5 million in funding from the federal government to develop a program to train new salespeople and CEOs.

Implications of COVID-19 pandemic

Inevitably one of the most frequently mentioned subjects was the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clients and partners discussed the variety of ways COVID-19, and the necessary transition to virtual platforms for many services, impacted their operations. Notably, there was a large variance in how COVID affected client and partners, ranging from needing to scale back services to having business increase.

Several partners and clients stated that COVID-19 negatively impacted them in several ways. Initially, many events or programs were suspended and only some of them came back in a virtual format. A common issue were the challenges posed by transitioning to virtual service delivery. Unstable internet or client inexperience with software caused several issues and compelled one partner to have to upload step-by-step tutorials for their clients to use Zoom. One partner explained that, *"People's patience for networking over Zoom has really fallen steeply down"*, and as a result it's much harder to get a Zoom event going. Another client observed that communication within the entrepreneur community has decreased.

"Before COVID we had the opportunities to actually see and talk to everybody and meet with each other one on one, either at our physically Tecconnect or RINSA. But when it comes to online delivery it is more difficult. Recently, when I tried to host a program in partnership with CIBC, even though RINSA was able to send out more information for more people to attend, we only had six people actually confirm that they were going to take part in it. And for an hour, both me and the facilitator sat there because no view came online." – interviewee.

That said, many other partners and clients expressed that COVID-19 posed limited negative, or even positive, effects on their performance. These clients and partners found success in their virtual events and programs. The virtual aspect of these meetings helped reduce travel and barriers and resulted in higher attendance than their pre-pandemic in-person equivalents. One client noted that it was fortuitous that Tecconnect had enhanced their online broadcasting system just prior to the pandemic, which greatly helped mitigate the technical challenges posed by a virtual service delivery. Another client noted a significant increase in their businesses, due to the nature of their business, due to the amount of people staying home during the pandemic.

ALBERTA INNOVATES

Concluding reflections

The diverse number of programs and activities that RINSA has developed over the past 10 years have been broadly welcomed by the entrepreneurial community, with a number of key observations for further strengthening and reform. These – somewhat – inevitably include reducing red tape, focusing on job creation and retention, and managing the mid-term impacts of the COVID pandemic. In addition, there is some confusion in the eyes of clients as to the role of the different organizations which, to a degree, may not matter as long as there is not any unplanned duplicative activity. That said, the absolute stand-out achievement of RINSA has to be its commitment to EDI, as evidenced by a range of specific programs aimed at different communities.

"When you say you are part of the RINSA network then there's more than one component. Saying it that way may help an entrepreneur realize that once you tap into RINSA, you're actually tapping into a whole network, not just one organization."
– interviewee.

Chapter 4: RINSA has strengthened the entrepreneurial ecosystem in southern Alberta

The final part of the realist framework focuses on the outcomes or impact of the programme, in this case RINSA. The interaction of the evolving context with the various activities that RINSA has developed over the past 10 years lead to a number of outcomes. In this chapter we review three types of outcomes at different unit of analysis (e.g. micro, meso, and macro): the first is a focus on three 'success stories' and four 'success snapshots' that were identified in the interviews and developed with individual entrepreneurs. This gives a micro level account of the impact of RINSA. The second is a network analysis of RINSA members, partners and clients that was commissioned from Gross Gilroy Inc., and provides a meso level view of network effects and how well-connected RINSA is. The next section, again commissioned from Gross Gilroy Inc., analyzed the macro level economic impact in terms of the contribution RINSA has made on GDP and jobs. We finish with a concluding reflection on the 'hidden impact' of RINSA, picking up a number of comments made in the interviews.

There are numerous stories where RINSA has helped companies start and scale up

During the interviews a number of 'success stories' were identified where RINSA, in different ways, had supported entrepreneurs in their journey starting and scaling up businesses. Here we highlight seven stories to illustrate the diversity of impact that RINSA has had as well as how that has manifested itself in the lived experiences of individual innovators. The first three are full success story timelines; the following four are success 'snapshots.'

AdvancedAg

AdvancedAg began in 2001 as Advanced Water Technologies Inc. when founder, Dr. Phyllis Day Chief, had an idea. She worked closely with an NRC IRAP Technology Advisor, conducting research with NSERC in partnership with Lethbridge College. Advanced Water quickly became an industry leader in natural water treatment solutions. In 2014, they began work with an Alberta Innovates Technology Development Advisor and in 2015 received Alberta Innovates' funding to attend CETAC – West's Entrepreneur to CEO Training.

In 2016, Joshua Day Chief created a division of Advanced Water Inc., AdvancedAg Inc., a family owned, Canadian company with over 20 years of leading-edge research on culturing specific bacteria species for a range of applications. Their proprietary BrewTus brewing technology allows them to selectively grow, stabilize and blend individual strains of bacteria into biologically active products to promote soil and crop health.

In 2017, they received both NRC IRAP funding and an Alberta Innovates Micro Voucher. In 2018, they received the Alumni Achievement Award for the Canadian Environmental Technology Advancement Corporation West (CETAC West). In 2019, Dr. Phyllis Day Chief was awarded the Western Economic Diversification Women Entrepreneurship Award. As the company's brewing capacity increased from 30,000 gallons in three facilities in 2018 to over 1 million gallons in over 40 brewing facilities across Canada in 2021, they received several awards. With increasing international exposure and new sector applications, the company continues to innovate and scale in the Town of Raymond Alberta. Also, Joshua fosters the growth of other entrepreneurs and researchers as a Tecconnect Business Advisor and with his appointment to the Lethbridge College Board of Governors. More recently Joshua has joined RINSA as a representative of the newly formed Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal

Council – Entrepreneurship Committee. A timeline of highlights from AdvancedAg's journey thus far is provided in Figure 5.
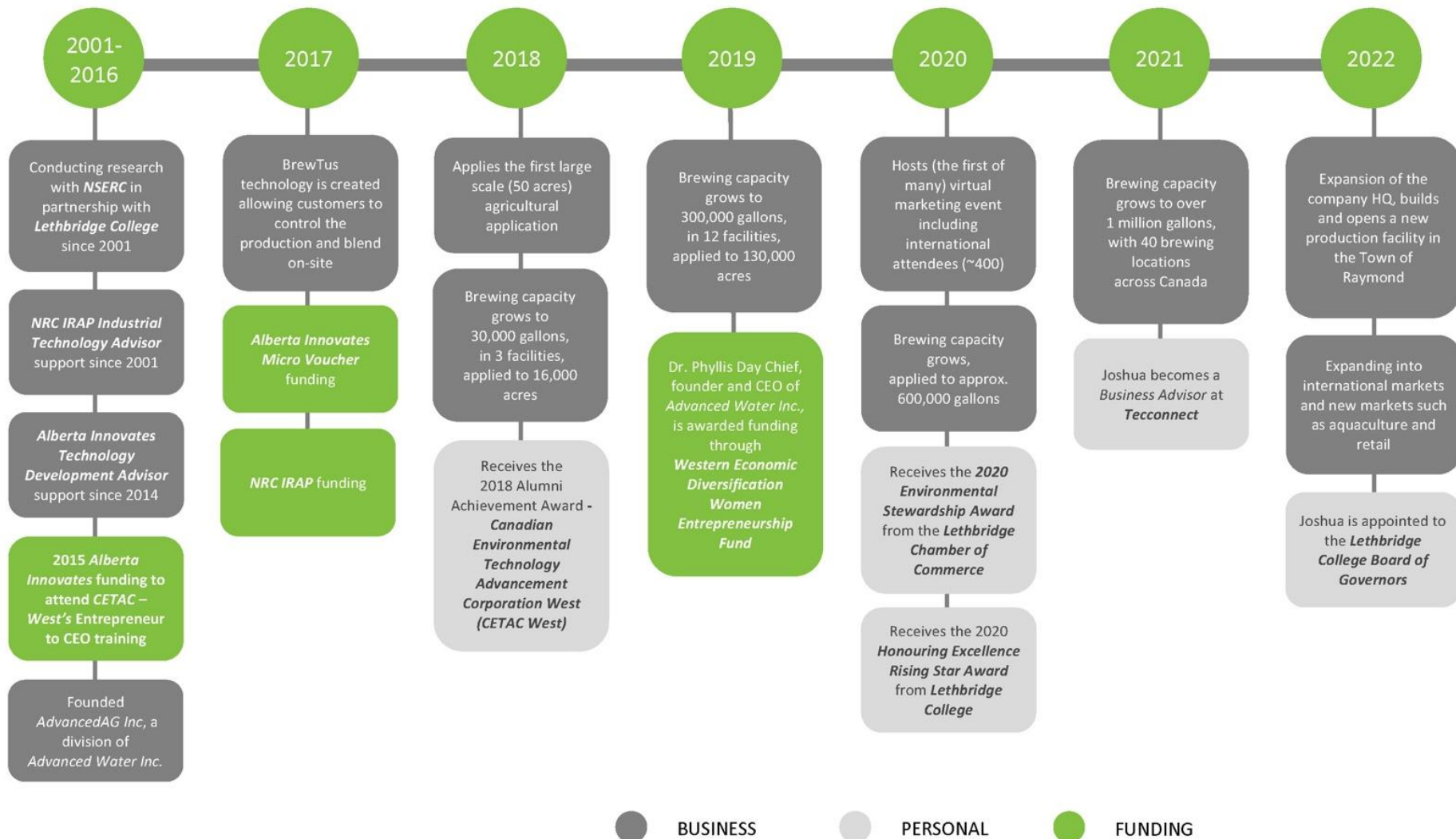

L-R: Dr Phyllis Day Chief, Joshua Day Chief, Ashley Wevers

> "No one starts up a business for the first time and they have it all figured out. I don't care who you are unless you've owned a hundred businesses before that. I think RINSA's networking and relationship building pieces have the biggest value. I don't know how you put a monetary value to that."
>
> Joshua Day Chief, CEO of AdvancedAg

Figure 5: The timeline of highlights of AdvancedAg Inc's Journey

2001-2016

Conducting research with **NSERC** in partnership with **Lethbridge College** since 2001

NRC IRAP Industrial Technology Advisor support since 2001

Alberta Innovates Technology Development Advisor support since 2014

2015 *Alberta Innovates* funding to attend *CETAC – West's* Entrepreneur to CEO training

Founded *AdvancedAG Inc*, a division of *Advanced Water Inc.*

2017

BrewTus technology is created allowing customers to control the production and blend on-site

Alberta Innovates Micro Voucher funding

NRC IRAP funding

2018

Applies the first large scale (50 acres) agricultural application

Brewing capacity grows to 30,000 gallons, in 3 facilities, applied to 16,000 acres

Receives the 2018 Alumni Achievement Award - *Canadian Environmental Technology Advancement Corporation West (CETAC West)*

2019

Brewing capacity grows to 300,000 gallons, in 12 facilities, applied to 130,000 acres

Dr. Phyllis Day Chief, founder and CEO of *Advanced Water Inc.*, is awarded funding through *Western Economic Diversification Women Entrepreneurship Fund*

2020

Hosts (the first of many) virtual marketing event including international attendees (~400)

Brewing capacity grows, applied to approx. 600,000 gallons

Receives the *2020 Environmental Stewardship Award* from the *Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce*

Receives the 2020 *Honouring Excellence Rising Star Award* from *Lethbridge College*

2021

Brewing capacity grows to over 1 million gallons, with 40 brewing locations across Canada

Joshua becomes a *Business Advisor* at *Tecconnect*

2022

Expansion of the company HQ, builds and opens a new production facility in the Town of Raymond

Expanding into international markets and new markets such as aquaculture and retail

Joshua is appointed to the *Lethbridge College Board of Governors*

● BUSINESS   ○ PERSONAL   ● FUNDING

Maxim Management Chartered Accountants / CliQue Advisor

In 2011, Obed Maurice, a chartered accountant by trade, founded Maxim Management Chartered Accountants. Ahead of his time, his entire team worked remotely, virtually connecting with clients to provide accounting, tax, and book-keeping services; thus, disrupting the accounting industry. In 2015, after four years and just weeks away from completely giving up on Maxim Management, Obed was introduced to the team at RINSA through Tecconnect. Maxim then became an incubator client and moved its offices into Tecconnect and was referred to Alberta Innovates' Technology Development Advisor for southern Alberta. Later that year, he was awarded Alberta Innovates' Commercialization Associate funding, to be followed by Alberta Innovates' Micro Voucher funding 2016- 2017 and NRC Funding for 2016-2017. In 2016, Obed was recognized by the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce as a Top 40 under 40 Entrepreneur. Also in 2016, Obed commissioned Output Media to create an explainer video that helped launch Maxim to be named Intuit QuickBooks Firm of the Future in 2017.

Obed founded his second technology company CliQue Advisor in 2018, and Maxim Management was acquired by Avail Chartered Professional Accountants. CliQue Advisor was connected to NRC IRAP and funded from 2018-2022, along with funding from Alberta Innovates Commercialization Associate Program (2019) and the Innovation Relief and Recovery Program (2021). In addition to two successful companies, Obed has been recognized for his numerous contributions to community initiatives, such as volunteering at the Lethbridge Community Addictions Treatment Society, as a Tecconnect Business Advisor, and serving with the Lethbridge Economic Recovery Task Force, to name a few. Of note, in 2022 Obed was awarded a Distinguished Service Award by CPA Alberta for his work in innovation and community service. A timeline of highlights from Maxim Management Chartered Accountants/CliQue Advisor's journey thus far is provided in Figure 6.

Obed Maurice

"Economic Development Lethbridge, the City of Lethbridge, and the Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta have helped create a killer ecosystem of entrepreneurship and innovation unlike anything else. People need to know that any industry, even a traditional one like accounting, can be disrupted and that's happening here in Lethbridge."

Obed Maurice

Figure 6: The timeline of highlights of Maxim Management Chartered Accountants/CliQue Advisor's Journey
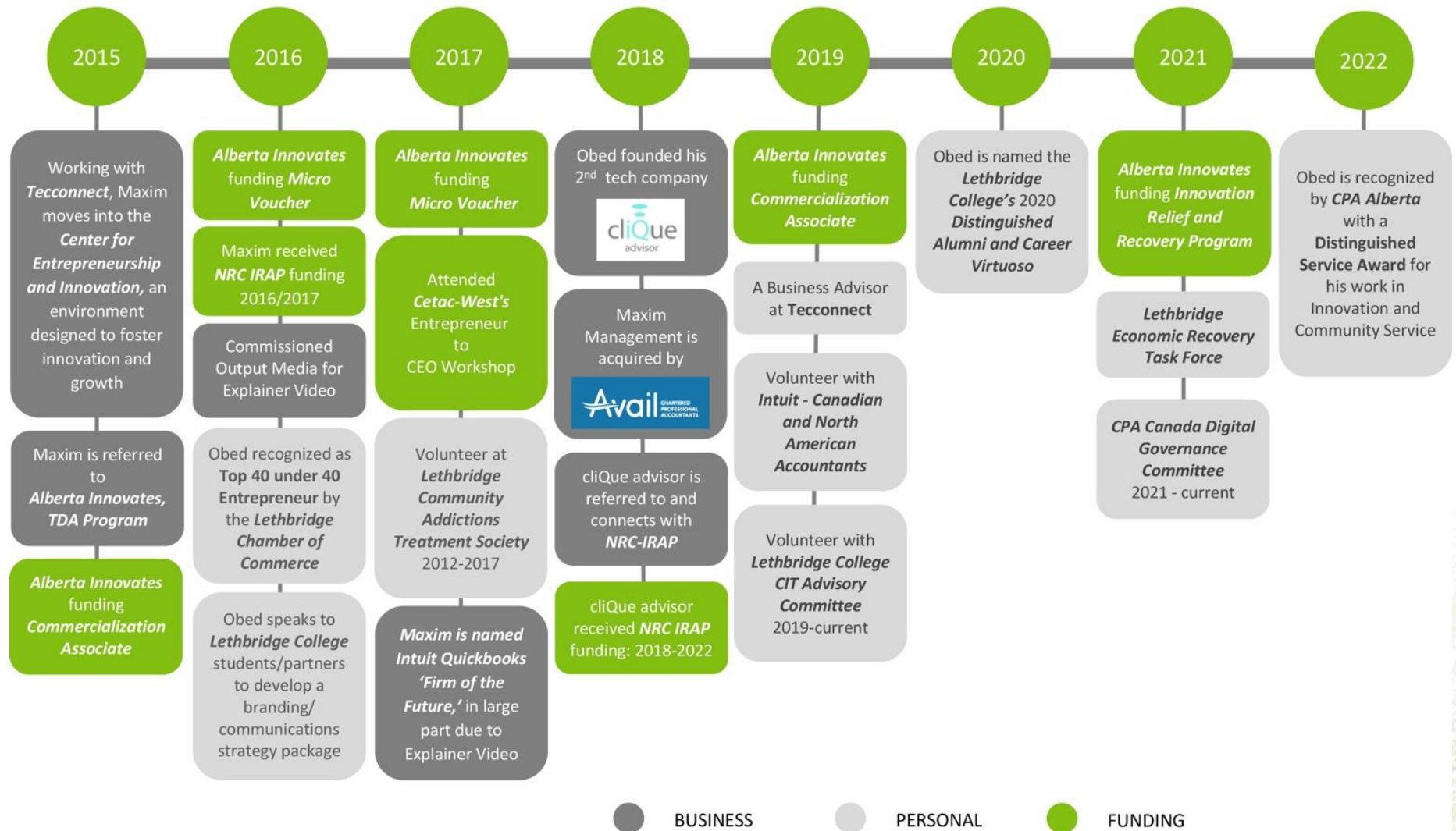
Southland Trailer Corporation

Southland Trailer Corp is a family owned, award winning, Canadian company that was launched by Monty Sailer in 1980. Originally, they manufactured camper trailer frames in a 3000 square foot shop. Over the following 40+ years, the company expanded operations several times, today operating an 80,000 square foot facility that manufactures four different product lines. Monty is now joined by his three sons, Ryan, Jason, and Scott, to make Southland Trailer an industry leader of trailer manufacturing in Western Canada.

Southland Trailer is an incubator where innovative ideas thrive and flourish to adapt to changing markets and consumer demands. Their company advantage is their in-house fabrication capabilities that allows them to 'think outside the box' to design and improve their products. Southland has received funding from NRC IRAP in 2014 and 2016-2017, and from four Alberta Innovates programs: Micro Voucher (2016), two research and Development Associates (2017 & 2018), and Commercialization Associate (2019). This funding and guidance from RINSA, Tecconnect, and Alberta Innovates' Technology Development Advisors enabled Southland Trailer to introduced robotics in their manufacturing; implement LEAN Management design, automation, research, and product development; and develop and market new trailer prototypes.

In addition to fostering the growth of their company, Southland Trailer cultivates the growth of their employees with an in-house Trades Apprenticeships Program, a 3-Tier Management Training Program, and through inclusive employment practices. They demonstrate their appreciation for their employees with numerous activities, awards, and benefits.

Southland Trailer is obsessed with finding ways to improve everything around them, from their products and processes to their commitment to better the lives of others in their community. Their commitment to community includes such activities as the Lethbridge YWCA Christmas Toy Drive, an annual pancake breakfast to benefit local charities, and sponsoring the Alberta Food & Beverage Expo in Lethbridge. A timeline of highlights from Southland Trailer Corporation's journey thus far is provided in Figure 7.

(L-R): Ryan Sailer, Jason Sailer, Scott Sailer, and Monty Sailer

> "Working with RINSA has allowed us to engineer and commercialize new products that directly resulted in over 20 FTE employees and help position us for exporting more products into the U.S. It also connects us with a network of people engaged in future technologies, more specifically blockchain, and the role that may play in supply chain management."
>
> Ryan Sailer, General Manager of Southland Trailer

Figure 7: The timeline of highlights of Southland Trailer Corporation's Journey

2002-2010
- *Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year* in manufacturing in 2002
- Developed in-house Trades Apprenticeships Program for employees in 2006

2011-2015
- Ryan Sailer won *National Association of Trailer Manufacturers Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award* in 2011
- *NRC IRAP* funding in 2014
- Introduced robotics in their manufacturing in 2014

2016-2017
- *Alberta Innovates Micro Voucher* funding in 2016
- Lethbridge *Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year – Innovation & Advancement* in 2016
- *NRC IRAP* funding in 2016 - 2017
- *Alberta Innovates research & Development Associate* funding in 2017

2018
- Worked with *RINSA* to implement *LEAN Management* design, automation, research, & product development
- Worked with *Tecconnect* to learn about blockchain to improve operational efficiencies
- Worked with *Alberta Innovates* TDA
- *Alberta Innovates research & Development Associate* funding
- Developed and marketed new trailer prototypes
- Sponsored transfer of 30 young wood bison from Alberta to Russia for species repopulation

2019
- Implemented numerous employee appreciation activities
- *Alberta Innovates Commercialization Associate* funding
- Expanded manufacturing capabilities with new building
- Partnered with *Taber Youth Employment Program* to provide work experience
- *ATB Financial Entrepreneur Centre's Business of the Month* to showcase opportunities for startups
- Recognized by *Employusyql* for inclusive employment practices

2020
- Developed in-house 3-Tier Management Training Program for employees
- Assisted **Lethbridge YWCA** with Christmas toy drive

2021-2022
- Sponsored *Annual Southland Pancake Breakfast* to benefit local charities (2018-present)
- Sponsored *Alberta Food & Beverage Expo* in Lethbridge in 2022

BUSINESS   COMMUNITY   FUNDING

Success Snapshots

Sinmi Esene: Daniola Corporation and the BIPOC Foundation

Sinmi Esene launched Daniola Corporation in 2017, a first of its kind, one-stop-shop, cloud solution that is transforming the up-stream, mid-stream, and downstream sectors of the mining industry. Sinmi was introduced to Tecconnect in 2019, with Daniola Corp becoming a incubator client/tenant and working closely with a Tecconnect Business Development Advisor soon after. Being a woman working in a male-dominated industry, Sinmi eagerly explored the training provided by RINSA and Tecconnect to advance her business and became a WESTEM ambassador. In 2019, she completed SAIT's blockchain training. In 2020, Sinmi began working with an Alberta Innovates' TDA and an NRC IRAP Industrial Technology Advisor. She also completed the Microsoft Women in Cloud (WiC) Accelerator. She received business funding from both Alberta Innovates Digital Traction program and NRC IRAP in 2021. Sinmi successfully applied blockchain and advanced technology to her company to optimize the supply chain process of the global mining industry. Daniola Corp's platform enhances efficiency in the end-to-end operations of the mining industry and provides a tracking and bid management system for minerals and metals, in alignment with industry standards and innovation. In 2021, Sinmi was awarded the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award.

Sinmi Esene

Sinmi also co-founded the BIPOC Foundation (black, indigenous, people of colour community) in 2021 (operating out of Tecconnect), for which Prairies Economic Development Canada Black Entrepreneurship Program's National Ecosystem Fund funded to launch. BIPOC is a non-profit organization that works to be a "catalyst for positive change for the black, indigenous, people of color community." Further, in 2022, the BIPOC Foundation announced the launch of their flagship program, Black Founders Hub – a 10-week accelerator for early-stage Black-led startups in Western Canada (AB, BC, SK, & MB). Also in 2022, Daniola Corp sponsors and is a panelist for the Global Diaspora Forum United Voices for Economic Empowerment by US/Africa Chamber of Commerce.

"We started Daniola Corp in 2017. Building a tech company is not easy and you need the advisors and the mentors, and this is a good thing that RINSA provides, having people like Bill and Renae and the people in the ecosystem that you can talk to. Also, I feel like mental wellness is not spoken enough about, especially in the tech ecosystem. The industry is high-risk, high-reward, and having people you know that you can have that one-on-one conversation with is important. When I started working with RINSA I was going to be a mom, and with my family it just made sense to be where there was support. Working with RINSA boosted my confidence, building my confidence as a leader."

Sinmi Esene

Allyson Cikor: Founder of Simulacrum Interactive, President of the Lethbridge Game Developers Society, and a Lethbridge College Instructor

After graduating from the University of Lethbridge in 2016, Allyson Cikor immediately became involved with a startup focused on virtual reality/augmented reality (VR/AR) technologies, which had an office in Tecconnect. During her time working with this startup, she attended numerous RINSA and Tecconnect events. She found the access to the entrepreneurial ecosystem in the Tecconnect physical space incredibly helpful, and she attributes this environment with motivating her to launch her own video game and application studio, Simulacrum Interactive.

Allyson became a Lethbridge College Instructor in 2017 for the Virtual & Augmented Reality and Multimedia Production programs. Since 2020, she has also been a researcher with START (Lethbridge College's Spatial Technologies Applied Research and Training initiative). She works directly with cutting-edge technology and industry partners doing research on developing and implementing technology-based solutions across multiple industries and creating new opportunities in the VR/AR space in Alberta. Allyson is also a Business Advisor for both Economic Development Lethbridge/ Tecconnect and WESTEM. Recognizing the issue around supports for entertainment, media, game development, and VR/AR, particularly for women in this male-dominated industry, Allyson founded and is President of the Lethbridge Game Developers Guild with the help of RINSA. She is a passionate community builder, annually hosting the Lethbridge sites of the Alberta Game Jam and Global Game Jam, as well as a Board Member of the Canadian Collegiate Esports League (CCEL).

"I think the biggest one hasn't been the content; it's been the networking. And part of that is allowing me to get a feel for what's out there. You're in your little bubble sometimes, and you don't know where the rest of the industry and other people are at. It's also gives you a network of people that aren't in your field or area of technical expertise, which is good. And all those connections have paid dividends both personally and professionally. When I came out of school, I had zero business experience. I had never considered entrepreneurship in any capacity and just going to some of those workshops, things were demystified a bit for me. Especially being a woman in tech, it can be very intimidating to be at the C-Suite level (the high-level business executives). It's very male dominated. It was nice to be able to go into RINSA training where I didn't feel dumb, a lot of the other people there had no idea what they're talking about either. RINSA made it very, very approachable. It was a huge confidence booster, and really what personally for me tipped me over the edge to think I could be an entrepreneur, I can do this."

Allyson Cikor

Guillermo Aceytuno: Founder of OnSite Auto

Guillermo Aceytuno graduated as an Automotive Service Technician in 1996. He obtained his Red Seal Journeyman Technician in 2002. He completed a Blue Seal Business Competency for Certified Tradesmen in 2016, which in trades would be equivalent to a doctorate degree. Soon after, Guillermo began his entrepreneurial journey with the launch of OnSite Auto in 2016. OnSite Auto uses innovative technology to help customers plan ahead by scheduling an appointment for maintenance when the vehicle needs it, at the most convenient time, and at the location the customer chooses, even their own home.

Guillermo participated in numerous RINSA and Tecconnect training sessions, worked with the Alberta Innovates' TDA to advance his business ideas, and was the Grand Prize Winner of the Community Futures Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge – Technology Stream in 2017 which included complimentary office space at Tecconnect. Guillermo also received funding through the Alberta Innovate Alberta Entrepreneurial Incubator program to help start his online business. In 2018, Guillermo helped up-and-coming young entrepreneurs as a Pitch Advisor for the Tecconnect Challenge for Lethbridge College Multimedia Production and Digital Communications & Media students. Currently, Guillermo is developing his ideas for a new on-demand apprenticeship system to help students access and complete their education and certification more efficiently.

Guillermo Aceytuno

"Having your own business, there's lots of weight. But with the people in RINSA, you build trust and friendship. They give you the confidence that somebody is there to help. It feels like a family. They give you a base, a support, and confidence. They are trying to help you to succeed."

Guillermo Aceytuno

Jefferson Gardner: InBridge Inc. and Blockchain Education

Jefferson Gardner is the CEO (2018-2021) and Co-Founder of InBridge Inc. As a Certified Blockchain Expert and researcher, Jefferson is lauded as "one of the biggest names in blockchain and artificial intelligence." Jefferson has worked in 11 industries and seven countries, consulting with foreign governments and large corporations in multiple areas.

Jefferson connected with RINSA and Tecconnect in 2018 as a client looking for help networking to establish InBridge Inc. in southern Alberta. His passion and expertise in (the then) new area of blockchain, sparked the idea to have RINSA and Tecconnect sponsor workshops and client events introducing blockchain to southern Alberta entrepreneurs. In its simplest form, blockchain is a digital collection of information about transactions (something akin to a ledger) that are linked together using cryptography. After four years, Jefferson is in demand speaking across the province and beyond and giving back to the community via many local engagements on the value of blockchain in agriculture and manufacturing in southern Alberta. Jefferson believes that elevating the entire ecosystem to use technology opens doors to collaborative opportunities that normally would not have happened.

Jefferson Gardner

"I think the most valuable piece of RINSA is the network. That's one of the big wins behind RINSA. It helps institutions to collaborate, communicate, and to pull their heads out of their silos."

Jefferson Gardner

RINSA is a well-connected, effective and efficient network

The features of the RINSA network indicate that the network is both effective and efficient. The inner circle of RINSA members is a well-interconnected network with no significant structural holes, and a low average number of links a member must use before accessing another given member. Its clusters seem to reflect the diversity of the members' specialized mandates and roles, and there are channels of collaboration between most players. Actors can easily access one another through RINSA. Over time, the network has grown significantly, with members establishing stronger connections with non-RINSA organizations and RINSA members alike, increasing the potential benefit of the network on the ecosystem.

Structure and key features of the RINSA Network

Figure 8 shows the "inner" RINSA network (member organizations only). The lines reflect the total frequency score of the relationship between two partners (thicker lines denote a higher frequency).[27] This is a very high-level representation of the network, but it shows that there are many interrelations between the players overall, in other words the RINSA network is highly interactive and strongly interconnected. There are no major structural holes, most nodes have a high number of connections, and the number of links an actor must use before accessing another given actor is low. Based on betweenness centrality[28], it appears that Tecconnect, NRC IRAP, Alberta Innovates and the University of Lethbridge act as brokers – or nodes playing a 'linking role' within the network. There are fewer links with Okotoks, which is understandable since they are a new member. There are also fewer links shown with Community Futures, but this is more of an issue of missing data.

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[27] In a survey of RINSA members, they were asked to indicate how frequently they interacted with other RINSA members for seven types of relationships: 1. Communicated directly (one-on-one) (e.g., phone call, email, meetings, etc.), 2. Co-delivered services and activities with this RINSA partner (e.g., training, workshops, presentations, programming for entrepreneurs, etc.), 3. Mentioned or provided information about this RINSA partner to clients, 4. Formally referred clients to this RINSA partner, 5. Formally received referrals from this RINSA partner, 6. Provided or received in-kind support to/from this RINSA partner (e.g., act as a judge/reviewer, provided advice) 7. Participated in events or activities organized by this RINSA partner.
[28] Betweenness centrality quantifies the number of times a node acts as a bridge along the shortest path between two other nodes.

Figure 8: RINSA Members Network, based on total score (without clusters)
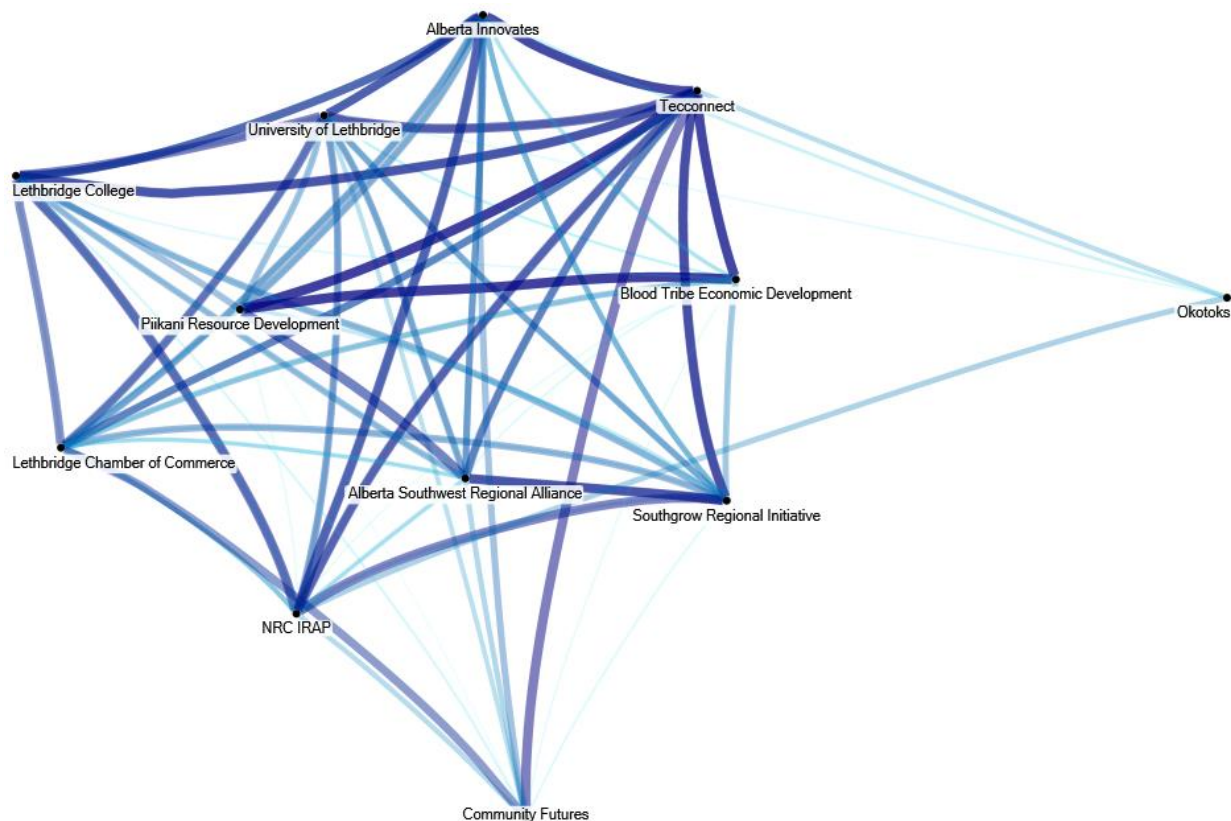
Figure 9 divides the whole network into smaller and smaller groups that are more inter-connected among themselves compared to their connections with other nodes. This figure shows that the University of Lethbridge, NRC-IRAP, Alberta Innovates and Tecconnect are part of a cluster, which is intuitive given that these organizations share a certain mandate to service innovative, perhaps more advanced firms (engaged in R&D, for example). Lethbridge College (the third funded entity) is found in the other cluster, with the regional networks, Indigenous development organizations and the Chamber, because many of these organizations confirmed interacting with the College more than they did with the University or the three other 'innovation-related' members.

Figure 9: RINSA Members Network - based on total score (with clusters)
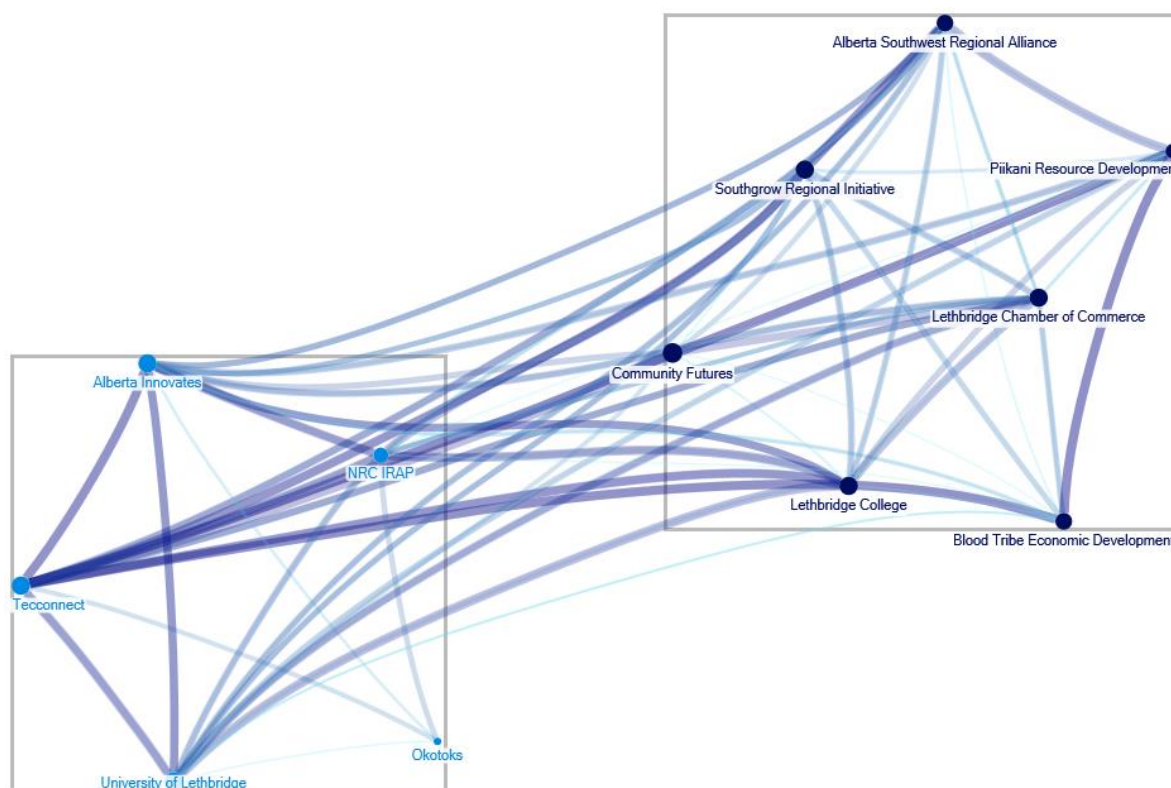
Highlights by Relationship Type

RINSA organizations were asked about the frequency of their contacts with other RINSA member organizations, based on seven types of interactions likely to generate value for clients.[29] Given the diversity of organizations present in RINSA, one would <u>not</u> expect all relationships to be equal – the fact that some organizations are more frequently in contact is logical. When partners understand their respective mandates and activities well, they can ensure that collaborations, mentions or referrals are relevant to their clients. Respondents also explained that as time goes by and partners understand their respective roles better, the frequency of communications (or various other interactions) might decrease as exchanges become more focussed, or occur in specific, relevant cases. The frequency of communications might thus decrease over time but retain its value in terms of potential benefits for clients.

The assumption is that by collaborating, RINSA members increase the value and reach of their supports to clients. Interactions create opportunities to leverage partners' resources, and refer clients on an as-needed basis, for example. Some relationships create direct value for clients (e.g., higher-quality events through co-delivery) and indirect, potential value down the line by strengthening the link between organizations.

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[29] These interactions are: Communicating directly (one-on-one) (e.g., phone call, email, meetings, etc.); Mentioning or provided information about this RINSA partner to clients; Providing or received in-kind support to/from this RINSA partner (e.g., act as a judge/reviewer, provided advice, etc.); Participating in events or activities organized by this RINSA partner; Co-delivering services and activities with this RINSA partner (e.g., training, workshops, presentations, etc.); Formally referring clients to this RINSA partner, and; Formally receiving referrals from this RINSA partner.

Referrals (Figure 10) are an important opportunity to create direct value for clients if they indeed link a client with the appropriate resources at the right time. Good referrals hinge on partners knowing about each other's mission and services, as well as having existing communication channels. Referrals are an area where even thin lines are important: if a referral creates value for one firm a year, this is still meaningful if this is what the firm needed at that moment in time.

Respondents explained that collaboration between RINSA members often hinges on interpersonal relationships. On the one hand, once people know each other, communications are facilitated. However, this also means that these communication channels (and hence, all other types of interactions) are often affected by change in personnel within organizations.

Figure 10: Inner RINSA Network – Blue: Referrals to (all on the left, high-frequency on the right); Red: Referrals from (high-frequency on the left, all on the right)
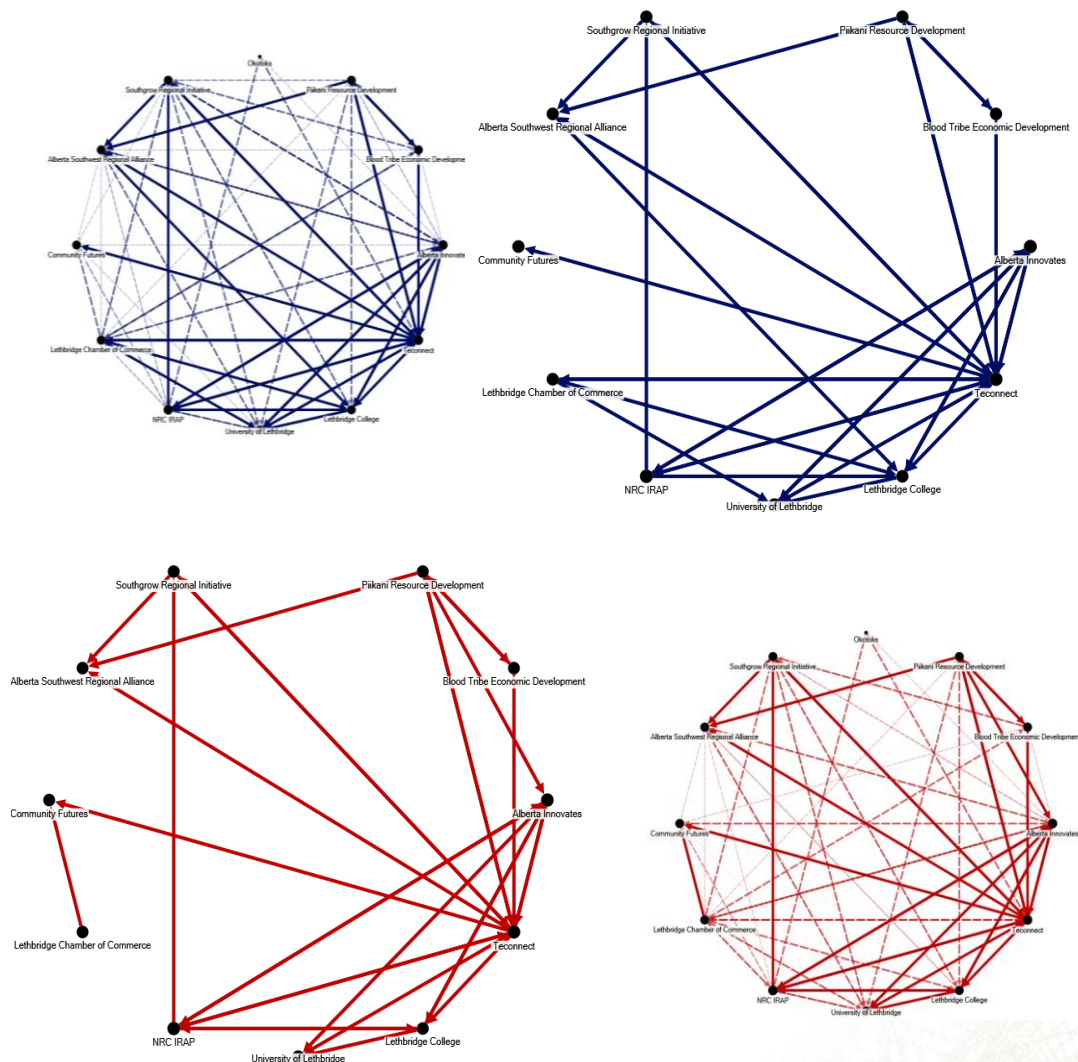
Note: In the red graphs above for "referrals from", the arrows are counterintuitive: they do not represent flow, but identify which organization a given node receives referrals from on a frequent basis (e.g., Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce often received referrals from Community Futures – even though the arrow seems to flow in the other direction).

RINSA and Other Organizations

Figure 11 shows the connectivity of RINSA members with their three main non-RINSA organizational partners, in terms of providing services to entrepreneurs. This is a 'backbone' graph, so to speak – showing the most frequent interactions in the network over the past three years. This graph shows how the highly interconnected RINSA network is also connected to a diversity of other actors in different sectors. The underlying assumption is that those resources can be accessed by clients (at least to some degree) through RINSA connectivity. Of course, clients may find their way to these players independently, but RINSA members offer some opportunity to identify these resources. Connectivity between RINSA and players in various regions (and with organizations whose operations are not limited to southern Alberta) is also a potential strength in terms of diverse resources being available via the network. Finally, collaboration with these various players can help RINSA members add value to their own offerings through co-delivery of activities, acquisition of new knowledge and contacts, and sharing of resources and expertise.

Figure 11: RINSA members and three most important non-RINSA partners
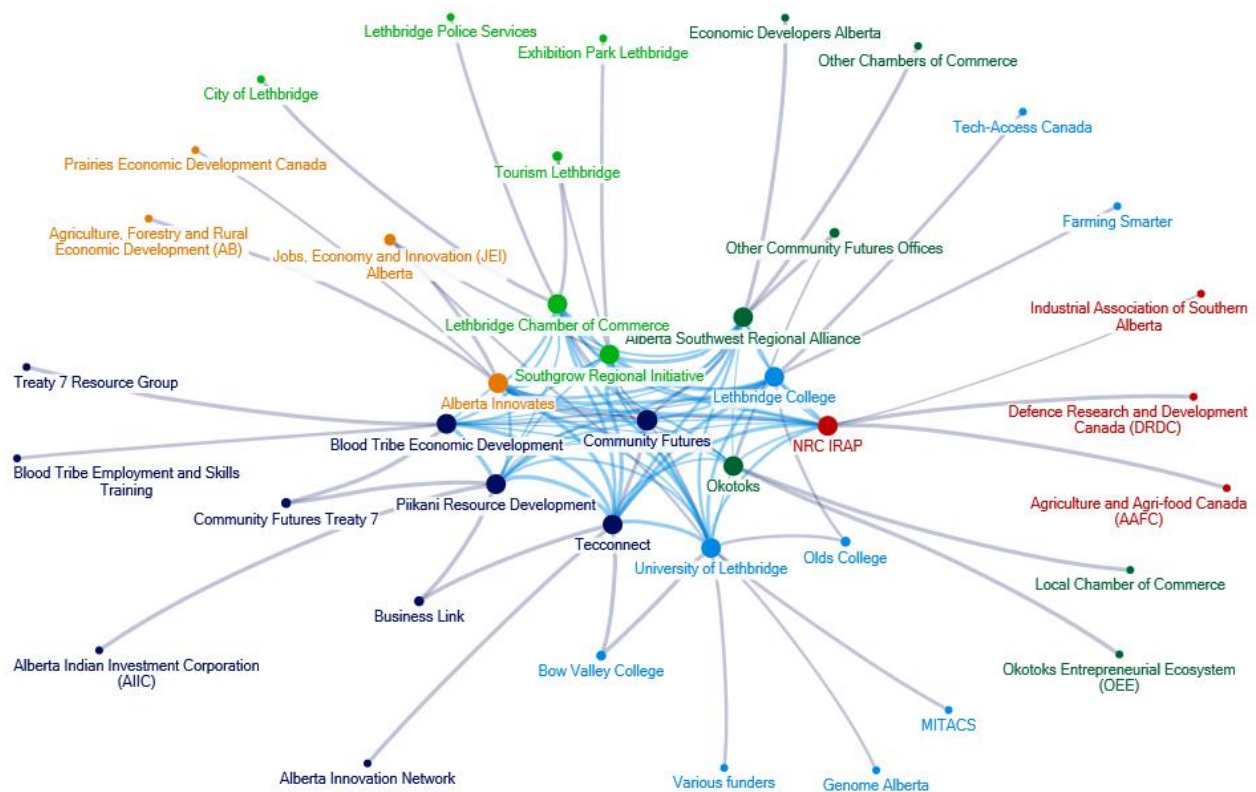
RINSA Evolution Over Time

Developing networks takes time. As noted in Gregson's meta-analysis: "Network participants must have enough time and opportunities to work together to facilitate their understanding of respective competences and identities."[30] The retrospective data conducted using RINSA annual report data shows the expansion of RINSA over time. Figure 12 represents what was reported in 2016-2017. Each year after that, there are new and returning partners. Given the nature of the reported data, the network cannot be expected to show constant, linear growth: things vary between reporting periods. Figure 13 for 2021-2022 shows an explosion of connections.

The RINSA progress and annual reports from 2016 onwards were the only source of information that could be used for the purpose of a retrospective network analysis. In the retrospective graphs in this section, the funded organizations (University, College, Tecconnect and RINSA[31]) are dark blue nodes, while non-funded RINSA members are pale blue nodes, and external partners/collaborators appear in black.

This data is partial: the reports only capture interactions that involved at least one of the funded RINSA organizations (so no relationships between non-funded RINSA members, for example). In reality, the RINSA network has likely much greater interactivity. Also, this data is impacted by what was reflected, or not, in each annual report. If the information was not present in the report, it is not shown in the graph and it is known that not all interactions were captured year after year (or not to their full extent in terms of importance). Some nuances were also lost when converting the qualitative, narrative information into interaction data. The data and approach used for this level of analysis is far from perfect because RINSA reporting was not designed for network analysis. Establishing reporting that captures interactions and collaborations more systematically would help in applying this retrospective approach to other networks.

Figure 12: Retrospective network data - 2016-2017

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[30] Gregson, G (2022). Meta-analysis of Networks. Alberta Innovates. *https://albertainnovates.ca/app/uploads/2022/07/AI-Meta-Analysis-of-Networks.pdf*
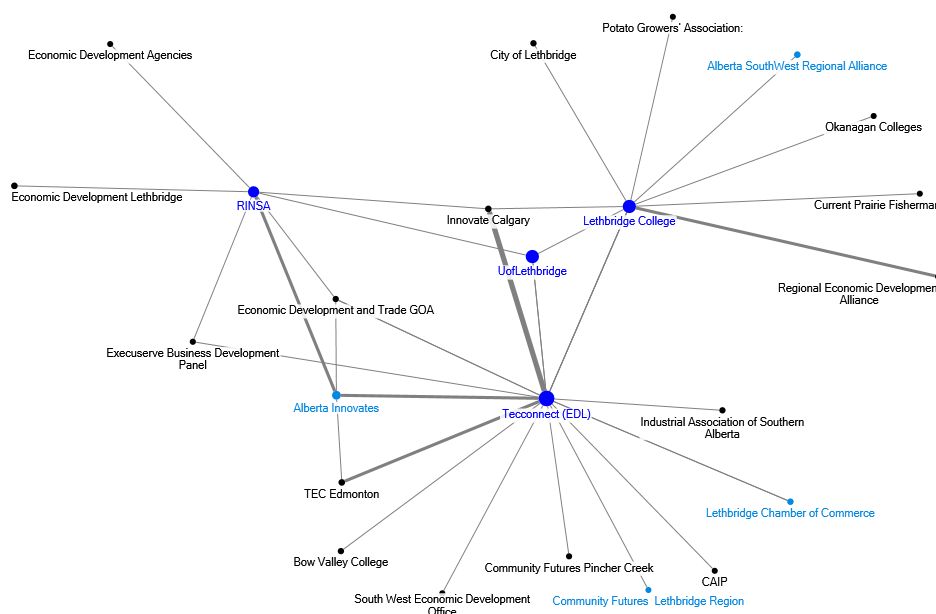
[31] Money flowing from the RINSA envelop is captured using a separate node in this data.

Figure 13: Retrospective network data - 2021-2022

Client Ego Networks

The goal of the client ego-networks was to understand the client perspective. The networks of individual firms allow entrepreneurs to overcome size and capability limitations.[32] Five firms were purposefully selected amongst volunteers who had responded to the 2021 RINSA client survey. Network analysis graphs were drawn to reflect the type of support that those entrepreneurs received, from whom, and how important those supports were. The questionnaire focused on interactions that helped the firms grow and innovate (as opposed to conducting regular business). The ego-networks show that it is important for firms to have various doors to knock on, and connectivity to help them identify the specialized resources they need as they progress.

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Firm 1 (an emerging innovative firm in the food sector) is shown below as an example. Firms (unnamed, to preserve confidentiality) are at the top of the graph. The second layer down shows the categories of support that the firm benefitted from and the bottom layer of each graph identifies which partner provided

Firm 1 is a small, emerging firm, in the manufacturing sector (food-related). The ego-network shows more important interactions in the areas of training, connectivity, advice and information (compared to technical support – which is an area where the firm is still developing and seeking the right partners). The firm has greatly benefitted from Tecconnect support via the WESTEM program, and leveraged the Government of Alberta Value-Added funding program. The firm also had connections with Bow Valley College and Business Link.
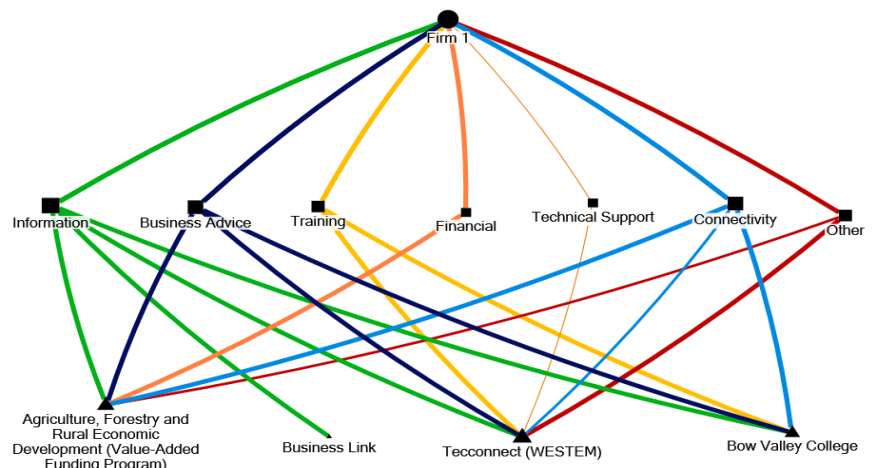
which type of support. The thicker the line, the more important or valuable the interaction.

However, not all interactions between a firm and a potential support organization turn out to be beneficial. This is one of the most significant insights drawn from the discussions with entrepreneurs. Several businessowners had made contact with organizations that, in the end, were not able to provide the support they needed, or provided poor support, in their view. For entrepreneurs with limited time and many competing priorities, finding the right partners quickly and efficiently is essential. This is an important potential benefit of an innovation network. If support organizations know of and are connected to other partners, they can be positioned to help firms navigate the support ecosystem.

Impact of RINSA on the Ecosystem

What the network analysis of RINSA reflects most clearly is the potential for value. The features of the RINSA network indicate that the network is both effective and efficient. The inner circle of RINSA members is a well-interconnected network with no significant structural holes, and a low average path length between actors. Its clusters seem to reflect the diversity of the members' specialized mandates and roles, and there are channels of collaboration between most players. Actors can easily access one another through RINSA. Over time, the network has grown significantly, with members establishing stronger connections with non-RINSA members and RINSA members alike, increasing the potential benefit of the network on the ecosystem.

RINSA, with its high density of connections, could be considered robust and resilient to major change. However, because collaboration is often based on relationships between individuals, connectivity is vulnerable to turnover in organizations. Finding ways to ensure that connectivity is maintained despite changes in personnel would be a good way to increase the network's resilience. Certain nodes in the network (namely the nodes in the 'innovation' cluster i.e., Tecconnect, the University, NRC-IRAP and Alberta Innovates) are especially well connected to other RINSA members. There are perhaps opportunities to strengthen connectivity between some of the other actors, to bolster the network's resilience and robustness, and create greater value for firms that are innovative, but have a variety of different profiles. The literature shows that networked relationships

are most strong and valued when they are reciprocated and active across different levels, sectors, and geographic areas.

For interactions with clients to be successful and beneficial, they have to come at the right time and match a firm's needs. Based on the literature, the RINSA network's features likely create value for firms in terms of helping entrepreneurs identify and access services (e.g., through mentions), and navigate the ecosystem (e.g., through referrals). Collaboration between RINSA partners can also enhance the quality of services and activities offered to firms, through shared resources and expertise (e.g., information, in-kind support, co-delivery).

As pointed out in Gregson's meta-analysis on networks; structural links do not automatically lead to network effects; effective and productive network collaborations require active involvement of partners, good knowledge among actors, resources to share, and conditions that are favourable to firms and entrepreneurs. On the other hand, there is no universal or optimal network structure, and it is difficult to directly attribute enterprise performance to network relations.

Because of the data available, the network analysis of RINSA is mostly descriptive. With stronger data sets – such as full administrative data on clients using the services of RINSA organizations – it would be possible to speak more directly to the benefits of the network. However, this research shows that there are ways to examine network characteristics and infer benefits from certain assumptions present in the literature on innovation networks and entrepreneurial ecosystems (see Appendix D.

Over the past 10 years, RINSA has delivered a tangible economic impact in Alberta

The economic impact analysis provides a quantifiable analysis of RINSA's services and support programs targeting start-ups and SMEs within the technology and innovation landscape. The retrospective analysis (2011-2021) includes an estimation of economic impact of RINSA's programs and commercialization support[33] provided to businesses. The economic impact analysis results are measured in terms of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment using Statistics Canada's Input Output Model. At a very high level, RINSA generates economic impact through two sources:

- Expenditures on various programs and activities including business advisory, training, and provision of network opportunities; and,
- Support provided to start-ups and small businesses for commercialization. Support is extended in the form of business advisory and networking opportunities which helps clients in attracting investments.

The program expenditures and the commercialization support drive RINSA's contribution to the region's economy. This contribution is expressed in terms of GDP and employment expressed as full-time equivalent employees (FTE).

Figure 14 shows the high-level overview of RINSA's combined cumulative economic impact from 2011-2021.

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[33] Represents economic impact of revenues generated by RINSA's clients as a result of commercialization investments enabled by RINSA's advisory, training, and other services.

Figure 14: RINSA's combined cumulative economic impact from 2011-2021

Cumulative Combined RINSA Economic Impact (2011 to 2021)
Input-Output Model

1,480 FTEs
Jobs Supported in Southern Alberta

$1M
in RINSA Program Expenditure Supported

→ **22 FTEs**
Southern Alberta Jobs

$204.86M
Contributed to Southern Alberta's GDP

$1.00
Invested in RINSA Program Contributed

→ **$3.09**
To Southern Alberta's GDP
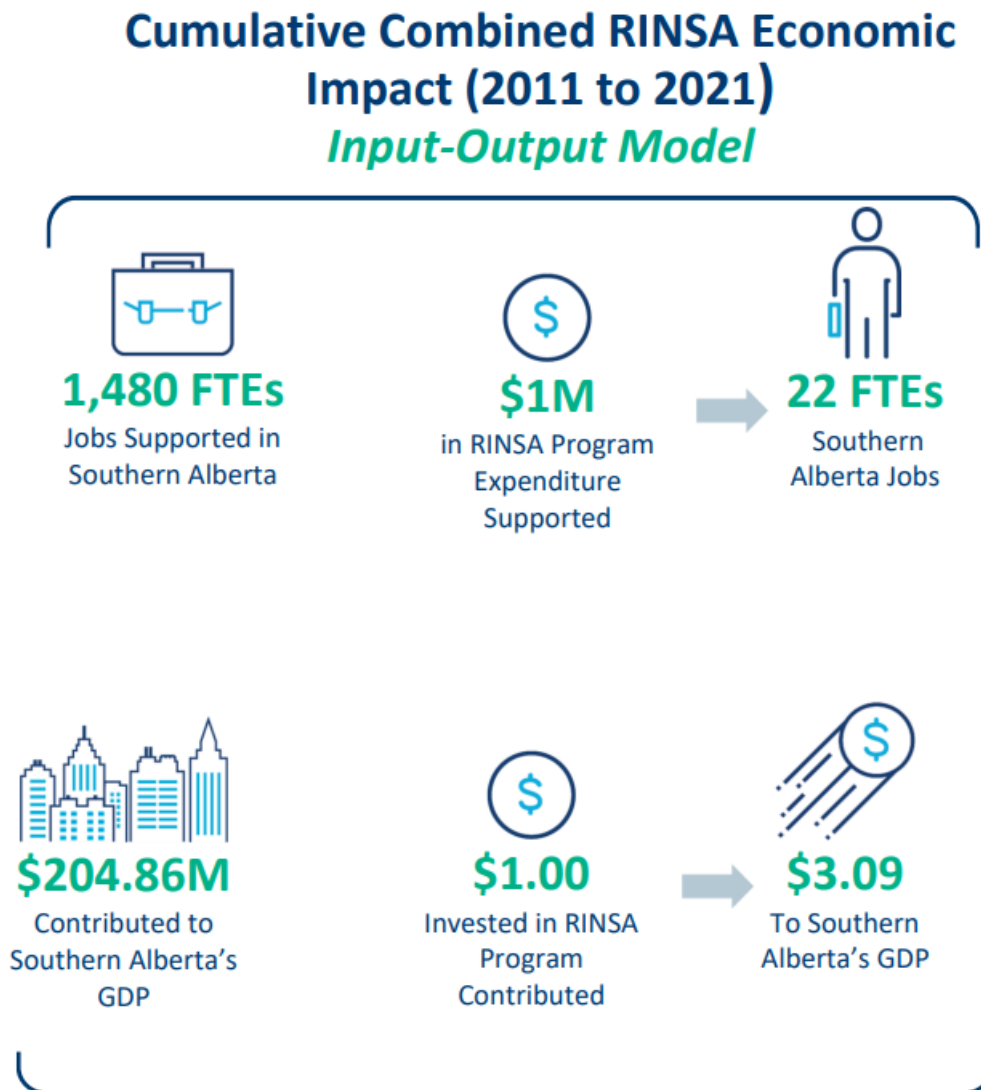
Figure 15 below shows the expenditures associated with programs undertaken by RINSA from 2011-2012 to 2020-2021. There has been a steady increase of RINSA's program expenditures (including WESTEM) at a compounded annual growth rate (CAGR) of 12 per cent from $348 thousand in 2011-2012 to $985 thousand in 2020-2021. Over the 10-year period, RINSA's program expenditures (including AEI andWESTEM) totalled $4.7 million.

In addition to the program expenditures presented in Fig 13, investments resulting from RINSA's commercialization support were also estimated. Over the 10-year period commercialization investments[34] totalled $61.4 million. Overall, RINSA expenditures and estimated commercialization investments enabled by RINSA's support generated a cashflow of $66.1 million during the 10-year period (2011-2021).

Figure 15: RINSA and WESTEM Program Expenditures

Program Expenditures *($'000)*
RINSA WESTEM ▲ Total

	2011-2012	2017-2018	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
Total	348.4	503.5	662.2	771.9	985.6
WESTEM				269.6	554.8
RINSA	348.4	503.5	662.2	502.4	430.8
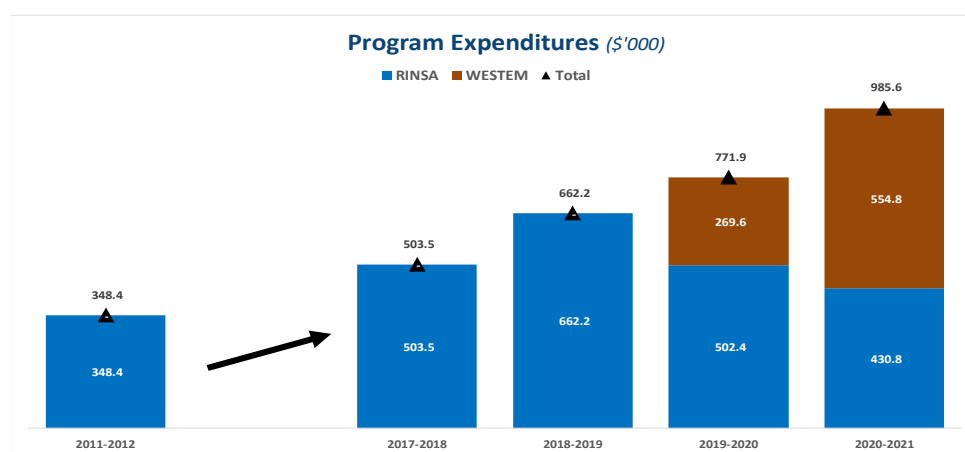
Note: Data for 2011-2012 was adjusted to reconciled with the Contribution Agreement. RINSA data for 2017-2019 includes program expenditures associated with Alberta Entrepreneurship Incubator (AEI) Program.

Impact on Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

As explained above, RINSA's economic impact in terms of GDP is driven by program expenditures and commercialization support. Figure 16 below presents the combined GDP impact of RINSA.

Since the impact of RINSA's commercialization support services may not be fully evident during the year in which the service was delivered, the study assumed that RINSA's support helped clients reap benefits for three consecutive years. In other words, to capture the full economic impact of RINSA programs on clients, commercial activities undertaken by start-ups/SMEs are assumed to have a three-year project life. Given the assumption of three-year project life, the 2020-2021 commercialization impact also includes the present value of benefits accruable in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023.

The combined GDP impact from program expenditures and commercialization support increased from $0.4 million in 2011-2012 to $54 million in 2020-2021; powered by initiatives like AEI and

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[34]Commercialization investments represent GGI's estimate of the investments attracted by the RINSA's clients (entrepreneurs & businesses) because of RINSA's commercialization support services which include activities such as its business advisory and training services. The estimates for commercialization investments were developed based on the analysis of RINSA's client survey results and financial data provided in RINSA milestones reports

WESTEM in 2017-2021. RINSA's combined GDP impact grew at an annual rate of 22.6 per cent (CAGR) from $29.5 million to $54.3 million during the same 2017-2021 period.

Figure 16: RINSA's Combined Program Expenditure and Commercialization GDP Impact
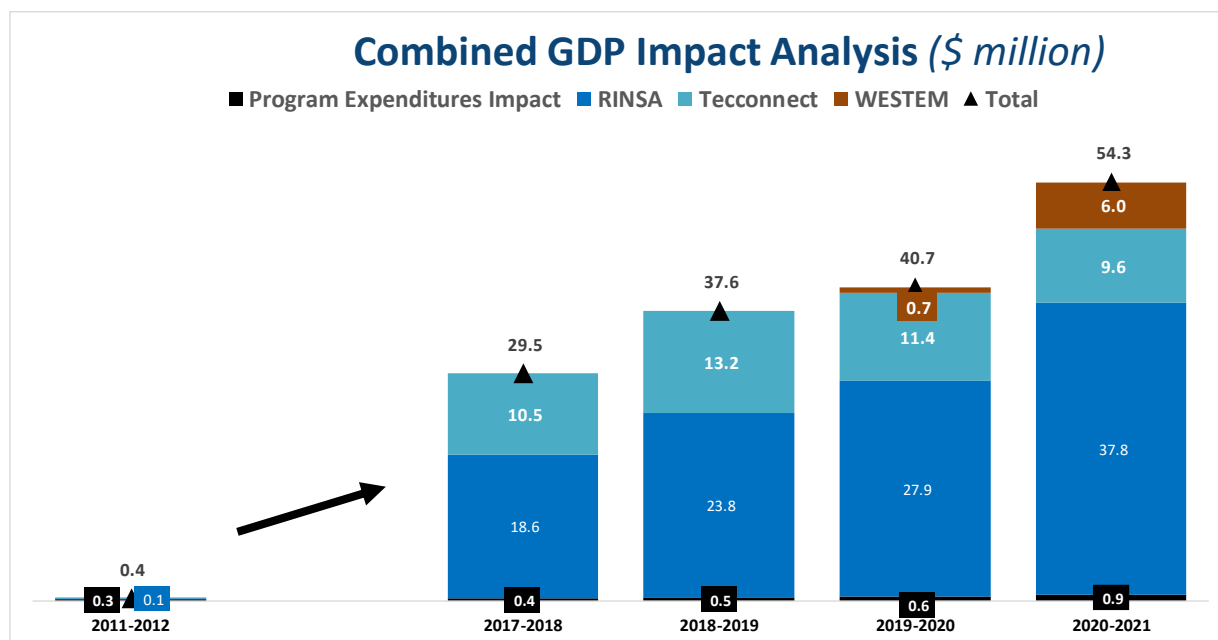
Note: The GDP impact from program expenditures includes the impact from WESTEM programs in 2019-2021. The GDP impact from commercialization support provided by RINSA is shown separately for EDL/Tecconnect, WESTEM & RINSA (including AEI but excluding Tecconnect, WESTEM).

Overall, RINSA's program expenditures and commercialization support is estimated to have contributed $204.86 million to southern Alberta region's GDP during the 10-year period. This indicates that each dollar in program expenditures and commercialization support is estimated to have contributed $3.09 to the regional economy.

Impact on Employment

Similar trends to those found in GDP impact were observed in the numbers of FTE jobs created and supported by RINSA's programs. Employment grew at an annual rate of 24.4 per cent from 210 FTEs in 2017-2018 to 405 FTEs in 2020-2021 (see Figure 17 below). RINSA expenditures and commercialization support are estimated to have contributed 1,480 FTEs to the economy during the 10-year period (fiscal years 2011/2012 to 2020/2021). For every $1 million in program expenditures and commercialization support invested, 22 FTEs were supported in the regional labour market.

Figure 17: RINSA's Combined Employment Impact
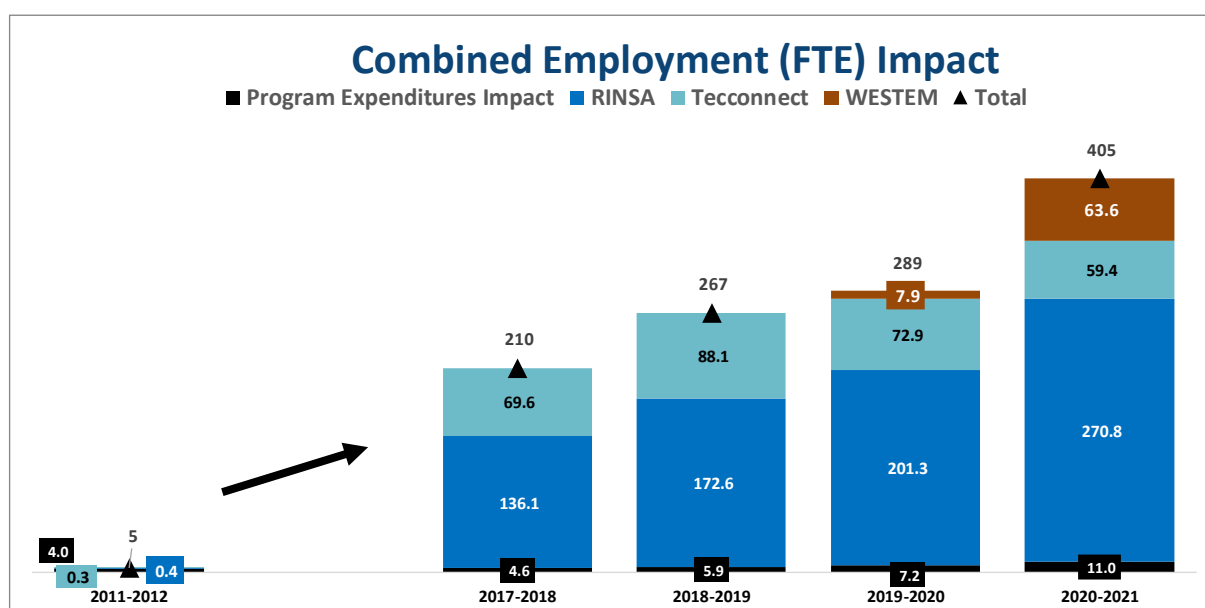
Note: The employment impact from program expenditures includes the impact from WESTEM programs in 2019-2021. The employment impact from commercialization support provided by RINSA is shown separately for EDL/Tecconnect, WESTEM & RINSA (RINSA here includes AEI but excludes EDL/Tecconnect, WESTEM). The employment impact generated by RINSA's activities considers the estimated incremental labour income and the information on Alberta's average industry-wide compensation published by Statistics Canada.

Overall, the GDP and employment impact estimates are based on a cumulative investment of $66.1 million over the 10 years, including $4.7 million for RINSA's activities (program expenditures), and $61.4 million commercialization investment enabled through RINSA's support. With a $204.86 million total GDP impact over 10 years (2011-2021), RINSA has made significant contributions to strengthen the region's economic growth, focusing on improving the entrepreneurial and innovation ecosystem in southern Alberta.

RINSA's activities generated a GDP impact of $3.09 per dollar invested and supported 22 FTEs per one million dollars invested. Furthermore, each FTE supported is estimated to have contributed $138.4 thousand to southern Alberta's GDP.[35]

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[35] Economic Impact Analysis of Research and Innovation (R&I) programs are typically not comparable due to factors including but not limited to:

    a) different scope of operations, e.g., RINSA has a regional focus, whereas several other similar programs have a provincial (Ontario Centre of Innovation) or national focus (CENGN).

    b) difference in nature, type, and mix of program activities, e.g., advisory services versus provision of testbed facilities for commercialization of technologies.

    c) difference in socio-economic factors including wage rates, labour skills, tax rates, technology development, entrepreneurial ecosystem, industrial composition, and inter-industry linkages affecting the R&I program, e.g., an equal amount of investment in two different programs would produce different economic impact results due to these socio-economic factors.

A broader guideline to measure the performance of the R&I program from an economic perspective is its contribution in terms of GDP and employment relative to general trends of the relevant economy. RINSA's GDP impact quadrupled in the last five years increasing from $13.8 million in 2016-17 to $54.3 million in 2020-21 as compared to only 3.5 per cent growth in southern Alberta's GDP* over this five-year period.

* Southern Alberta's GDP was estimated using Statistics Canada's data on GDP by CMA, Census data of 2016 and 2021 along with other published reports.

Concluding reflection – the hidden impact of the unmeasurable

An important consideration when reviewing the impact of RINSA on the local community are those often intangible and unmeasurable ways-of-working that have helped shape culture and through that the ability of people in southern Alberta to feel confident in taking risks leading to both innovation and entrepreneurship. In this final section we document some of the feedback, heard largely through interviews, not captured elsewhere in the case study.

A common theme was how RINSA – and the framework of RINSA – allowed people to build personal relationships across sectors, organizations, and other perceived silos. For example one interviewee noted:

> *"I felt more comfortable connecting some researchers at the university with some of our business people in the area. Without the RIN and having some kind of personal relationship with those people at the university, I might not have felt quite as comfortable in knowing where to go. And that's the other thing, is an institution look somewhat formidable from the outside, and if you even have one person whom you know you can call and say, "Hey, here's what I'm doing." "Who in your place should I be talking to?" That's huge. You're creating a little gateway or an entry point in a trusted way. …. The RINSA partners feeling confident and comfortable talking to other service providers in their community who they might have felt intimidated by in the past (before RINSA) aligns with the clients saying that they feel more confident after interacting with RINSA people when there was the "warm hand off" and someone from RINSA they feel comfortable with to go back to after a referral. It is a big impact how RINSA has created safe pathways for people to explore things/ideas without fear that someone else will think their questions/ideas "dumb" and they get support to keep pursuing new knowledge and ideas and/or their goals."*

Another 'hidden' impact is the bringing together of disparate pieces of information and resources and people with varied skillsets under one 'RINSA umbrella' to make everything more accessible and more powerful when viewed in the context of other related information:

> *"Okay, two minds are better than one, and now you got 10 minds in here, what can we accomplish? And who's going to be the winner?" It's going to be our entrepreneurs. And we can collectively stand and say, "Wow, look what we did. We managed to put this together as a group and really support our clients in the ecosystem, collectively."*

> *"RINSA is an example of a group of people and organizations seeing a larger vision of what could be and working together for the greater good of everyone over a long period of time."*

Another example is how having the network has enabled the service providers in the community to act in a more responsive, organic, and quicker way – which is often needed by SMEs when they are starting out and growing:

> *"We found out that companies really need to pick up the phone and ask a question when they're in a situation. They don't have time to take a course or complete an entire program. They just need help today."*

Related to this agility is a recurrent concern how counting metrics misses these subtle but important interventions and ways of working:

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"And together we sort of cobbled a solution, and it was all about the companies and how we can best move them forward. And I think that's a meaningful metric. If a company is able to articulate that they were able to move from wherever they were and got unstuck or avoided a pitfall or overcame a challenge or learned something and they were able to use, to move forward their business in some way, and it comes from them, I that's very meaningful. "Without RINSA, I couldn't have accomplished X," whether it was pick up the phone call and talk to somebody, or whether it was a training, a specialized, intellectual property, or product design or whatever it might be that the network is able to provide through that leadership. To help the company we don't have to solve everything, and they don't have to make $10 million. And it's hard to follow metrics like that."

Finally, RINSA gives its members permission to explore new ideas and supported them when they want to pursue something because it is the right thing to do, even if it takes a long time. This quote is from a representative from an Indigenous community collaborator organization illustrates this point:

"RIN in particular is very leaps and bounds ahead when it comes to the comparison to other RINs of that inclusivity and ensuring that the proper voices are at the table, right? And so I think I credit Renae and others for fighting for that exclusively and very... what's the word I'm looking for? Regularly I guess. It's kind of incessantly sometimes. Renae would very much be like, "This is what's right, and this is what we should be doing". And she would try to find the ways in order to make that come across to others, but also to ensure that she and others are doing it in the right way, I guess you could say. So with Indigenous groups specifically, I think if there's lessons learned to go to other RINs, right, and say, "This is how to actively include that group of people and other groups of underrepresented groups," then it's a process. And it's a lengthy process. It doesn't happen overnight. It's something that you have to work at consistently and build trust, build a relationship, build that vulnerability and that peace, that's very important for both individuals because... both parties at the table there because I know that there are these great resources out there, but especially when it comes to innovation at tech STEM areas, there's a huge distance between that industry and the Indigenous groups and the underrepresented groups, they're really trying to look at, "How do we fit into this space? Is this for us?"

The combination of the macro level economic impact analysis, the meso level network analysis, and the micro level success stories and the examples of individual feedback illustrate how, over its first ten years, that RINSA has made a difference to its local community in supporting, stimulating and strengthening the entrepreneurship ecosystem in the region. The final chapter of this retrospective impact case study looks to identify a number of lessons learned and actionable insight that arise from RINSA's story to date.

Chapter 5: There are a number of actionable insights and lessons learned from this retrospective impact case study that can be applied to RINSA and other RINs in the future

In this final chapter we aim to draw out a number of key observations and actionable insights arising from the realist retrospective impact case study of RINSA. It should be stressed at the outset, given the nature of the case study, different participants in the process will reach different conclusions and indeed that is to be welcomed. To illustrate this, we have provided an epilogue that captures the thoughts of both the RINSA community and the funder, Alberta Innovates. It was felt that was useful as both have been integral to the development of the case study and have shaped, and been shaped by, the data and evidence as it has been collected and synthesized. Consequently, both organizations have reacted to some of the early observations in already implementing changes and adjusting elements of their work illustrating the formative nature of the impact case study. As a result, the five key observations and five actionable insights identified below are aimed at a broader community of those interested in developing innovation networks – in Alberta and elsewhere – and curating entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Key observations

RINSA has had an impact on the entrepreneurial ecosystems in southern Alberta

Throughout its short history RINSA has worked with the communities of southern Alberta to help create an environment within which innovation and entrepreneurship can and has flourished. The founding of RINSA was, in itself, entrepreneurial and not without risk as it bought together a number of different organizations that had not worked together in the past, exploited a window of opportunity with the development of Tecconnect and access to funding, and established a way of working that would help shape its future agenda. As RINSA matured it continued to adopt that approach in the activities and programs it devised, including a ground-breaking commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion with a specific focus on both women entrepreneurs and those from Indigenous communities. The overall success of this approach is clear in the preceding chapter, with explicit examples of individual successes, the creation of a robust and strengthening network of institutions resulting in tangible economic impact in terms of jobs created and contribution to GDP.

Relationship and trust building is central to the development of a robust entrepreneurial ecosystem

One of the recurrent themes that came out of the interviews and workshops was how members of RINSA trusted one another. This does not mean different founding members did not have their own specific agendas, nor that there were no disagreements, but there was an intrinsic belief in what the early founders were trying to do and an inherent trust between their individual representatives who sat at the RINSA board table. Arguably the local alignment of the ecosystem occurred in spite of divergent influences from other levels of government. Nevertheless, as the innovation literature tells us, innovation is a contact sport meaning that it is about people, relationships, and ideas and how they converge through entrepreneurship to create novel services and products. Critical to this is having trusted collaboration throughout the innovation pipeline. The deeper the relationships and

knowledge of each partner organization and participating representatives (and other members), the better connection, usage, and collaboration is yielded as a result.

Engaging with Indigenous and other under-represented communities takes time, effort and respect

As noted in Chapter Three, one of the standout successes of RINSA has been its engagement with different communities, including the Indigenous entrepreneurs in southern Alberta. A recurrent theme that came out of the interviews – including with members of this community – was how RINSA had worked closely with Indigenous economic development organizations on reserve and in the surrounding communities in offering its services and support to local entrepreneurs. Given the challenging social and economic context that these communities face the role of innovation in creating economic activity is of critical importance. It is a testament everyone involved with RINSA that they prioritized the engagement of Indigenous communities as core to its programmatic activities but as noted by many interviewees invested the time and effort in a respectful way that is now beginning to see dividends.

It is important not to 'over manage' the ecosystem, giving entrepreneurs time and space to develop whilst providing support and guidance where needed

An important observation arising from the realist, retrospective, impact case study is allowing networks the time and space to grow and develop in their own context delivering on local need for local people. There is a tendency that such interventions can be over managed, partly due to understandable accountably demands from government funders. Getting the right balance between autonomy and accountability seems key for the successful curation of an innovation network and entrepreneurial ecosystem and broadly speaking RINSA and its funder, Alberta Innovates, have found that equilibrium. An example of which include the small project fund which was used sensibly in facilitating relationship building in the community without requiring excessive reporting.

Meaningful measurement is difficult and should not stifle innovation

The assessment of innovation and entrepreneurship is difficult but critical to understanding impact. Part of this is developing 'metrics that matter' and the other part is having the data infrastructure in place. At the same time, and as noted above, it is important to have the right balance of metrics, so measurement is not overburdensome inadvertently dampening innovative activities. Indeed, given that innovation should embrace failure it may be the case that measuring individual program contributions could in itself be counterproductive. As result a sophisticated and mature approach is needed to when it comes to developing metrics for innovation networks and entrepreneurship ecosystems like RINSA. What was clear from undertaking this impact case study is that current data that is captured for all the Regional Innovation Networks (RINs), including RINSA, needs reviewing as it was not of sufficient quality or quantity for both the network analysis nor economic impact analysis. Table 2 provides a list of key data that will be needed in the future if these two assessments are to be repeated. Additionally, the interviews illustrated the power of qualitative data as it allowed key protagonists to tell their story both adding a richness to the data but also highlight key issues that would not necessarily be picked up in the metrics.

Table 2: Suggestions for future data requirements for network and economic analysis

Network Analysis		
Impact Element	Indicators	Source
Density and dynamism of the inner RINSA network	Interactions between RINSA member organizations, and between RINSA members and non-RINSA partners	Network analysis questionnaire administered to RINSA members, through interviews Analysis of RINSA reports OR equivalent data collection through Excel template
Utilization of network resources by clients	Visualizations of which clients use what RINSA resources (e.g., participate in the activities and use the services of RINSA members) – with attribute data (e.g., by sector, by size of firm, by stage of entrepreneurial stage).	Relational client database (would have to be developed) *Presents challenges with regards to terms of confidentiality between RINSA member organizations and their respective clients*
Connectivity between clients	Network analysis results based on a sample of RINSA clients (e.g., specific sector, firms from a same service 'cohort', or clients of a specific RINSA member) to describe links between firms and the benefits of those relationships facilitated or supported through RINSA	Case study approach; selected sample of firms, and network analysis questionnaire administered through interviews
Qualitative data on network impacts	Views of stakeholders on network effects	Qualitative component of direct data collection for network analysis (e.g., interviews)
Economic Analysis		
Program expenditures	Annual staff wages (in $) in pro-rata to time spent in managing the program Transfer payment dollars	Financial information systems
Non-government investments	Investments made by program participants in business projects from private sources (internal and external)	Client survey (new questions) Other data collection mechanisms of program partners
Revenues generated by businesses	Sales in $revenues from IP, patents, and copyrights in $	Client survey (new questions) Other data collection mechanisms of program partners
NAICS codes, for I/O analysis purposes	Self-categorization to 2-digit code categories.	Client survey (new questions) Other data collection mechanisms of program partners

Actionable insights

When inviting new partners to the network, ensure there is an understanding of the expectations of collaborative relationships and governance

It should go without saying but all innovation networks should have an effective leadership group, built on collaboration with transparent governance in place that is underpinned by an agreed and shared set of guiding principles. As networks inevitably require constant refreshment it is important that these guiding principles are shared with new partners and 'live' throughout the network through the constant sharing of success – as one interviewee put it, "successes shared are success sustained."

Don't reinvent the wheel, but learn from other networks

A number of the key observations and actionable insights identified through this retrospective impact case study are applicable to the other RINs in Alberta, and innovation networks elsewhere. Whilst it is important to learn from others it is also as important to acknowledge the specific context within which RINSA developed and examine whether the observations and insights are indeed transferable to other contexts. There are some areas – for example in collecting consistent data (see Table 2) – where it is clearly appropriate that a region wide approach be adopted. But as is clear from the realist approach adopted for this review context also maters, meaning local solution should not be drowned out through a desire to standardize.

Small amounts of 'soft' funding oils the wheels of entrepreneurship

As mentioned earlier, the TDA fund was a unique innovation for RINSA that could be adopted by other innovation networks elsewhere. It helped partner organizations engage in RIN-related schemes and made them feel part of the organization. The availability of small amounts of money that is not tied up in form filling and red tape can have a disproportionate impact in helping to build relationships and developing the network. It is a 'lean' and relatively cheap example of how to support innovation which may be especially applicable to small communities.

Focus on marketing and awareness building of RINSA (and other RINS)

One of the challenges that RINSA faces, that is likely to be the case for other RINs and innovation networks, is that an entrepreneur may not know who to contact and when. This is the classic 'front door' issue i.e. which door do you knock on if you need help, and came up a number of times in interviews. As such RINSA, RINs and Alberta Innovates could do more to raise awareness of the services that they provide, including target advertising of the RIN coaching, mentoring and networking/workshop services. Lead partners can also contribute by being visible and present, in consistent fashion, to the other partners and the broader community, and keep engagement and value of membership a focus.

Coach entrepreneurs to share strategically keeps businesses growing

One issue that arose in the interviews is that advisors and RIN members who deal directly with clients need training in effective coaching and mentoring. All the regional networks should emphasize that a client of a RIN is a client of the entire Alberta system, so interactive referrals are key. A referring advisor must follow up to ensure the client is getting quality services and effective coaching. The principle that 'once a client - always a client' should be held by all RIN's. The local network should require an advisor to check back on progress, emphasizing that the personal touch is key.

Epilogue

Given the formative nature of the retrospective impact case study, both RINSA and Alberta Innovates responded to some of the emerging feedback as the fieldwork unfolded. This led to real time adjustments to policies and practices, which are described below by Renae Barlow, on behalf of RINSA, and by Michael Kerr, Director, Regional Innovation on behalf of Alberta Innovates.

Epilogue by Renae Barlow, VP Entrepreneurship & Innovation, EDL, RINSA member, April 2022.

Tecconnect and the RINSA network had their genesis 10 years ago born from the idea that, through the support of technology centric companies, we could diversify economic impacts of the region and keep local post-secondary Information Technology graduates as qualified workforce to the region. In the beginning, there was considerable doubt that this could be accomplished especially as Tecconnect would be built as a community-based incubator rather than one located within a post-secondary environment. However, the vision held by the Economic Development Lethbridge (EDL) Board of Directors and City of Lethbridge Council at the time of inception, provided the impetus to persevere to accomplish and actualize the vision. This 10-year impact case study reveals the considerable positive influences of this ecosystem on the region as a result of the formation of the innovation network catalyzed by the building of the incubator centre, Tecconnect. Over the past decade, the vision also evolved into ensuring supports included serving entrepreneurs in under-represented groups such as Indigenous economic development and newcomers to Canada. The existence of Tecconnect and RINSA also provided the important ecosystem supports and foundation for a successful funded proposal in 2019 through Western Economic Diversification *(Women Entrepreneurship Strategy)* for a "Women Entrepreneurs in STEM" initiative with an emphasis on rural/remote and Indigenous/Newcomer entrepreneurs delivering a three-year program with robust programs and mentoring traditionally only available in urban centres.

The RINSA Impact Case Study revealed the many facets of supports and their influences across the region highlighting successes as well as areas for improvement. Throughout the past year as this impact case study was launched and interviews/surveys conducted, the findings were continually shared with RINSA. It was important to the partners in RINSA that we were provided with aggregated insights as the impact case study was being conducted to help inform the path forward with a new funding agreement with Alberta Innovates coming in April 2022. This continuous feedback loop helped inform and provide insights into how we might expand and improve our efforts. The new agreement, started in April 2022, was heavily influenced by having this valuable and validating information. One of the areas that was identified as a gap was services and programs associated with scale-up and growth supports. Interviews and feedback from entrepreneurs revealed that while they received exceptional startup supports, these supports dropped off as they started to scale and grow. Many suggested that the one-on-one advisor support provided in early startup would be even more helpful in the scale up and growth stages. As well, the pan Alberta ecosystem was changing with the addition of the Alberta Innovates pre-accelerator and accelerator programs that highlighted the need for rural/remote companies, such as those in the Lethbridge region, to have access to these supports. It became clear that in order to meet the identified needs of scale up and growth companies, level the playing field with access to new urban-based *(Calgary and Edmonton)* supports, we needed to pivot some of our services.

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Since the inception of RINSA, the post-secondary institutions have continued to develop more and more start-up entrepreneur resources in addition to their existing scale-up and growth offerings. The creation of the University of Lethbridge Agility Innovation Zone *(partially funded through private donations)*, new industry research collaborations *(i.e. Synbridge, Blue Sky Analytics, Allos Bioscience)*, and the addition of the Integrated Agriculture Technology Centre *(funded through NSERC's Technology Access Centre grant)* and the Spatial Technologies Applied Research and Training Centre *(funded through The Canada Foundation for Innovation)* to the existing Centre for Applied Research, Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Lethbridge College, have matured both institutions to a place where services can be provided broadly to entrepreneurs and growing companies throughout the region.

Through RINSA partner discussions and planning sessions, the University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College pivoted to developing more start-up supports such as the LeanStack innovation platform, prototyping *(UofL Innovation Zone & Synbridge)* and applied research (focused on agriculture and spatial technologies), respectively, directly assisting local companies with specific, practical solutions to industry challenges. This enhancing of the start-up ecosystem has also initiated discussions of an entrepreneurial micro-credential through the University of Lethbridge Dhillon School of Business that could stimulate even more innovative start-ups in southern Alberta. Lethbridge College's commitment to RINSA and the wider AIN is to provide applied research services that are technology-based and entrepreneur-centric. The College fosters an environment of collaborative support for all clients and partners, actively referring to and co-creating initiatives to provide exceptional support. The College embraces a pan-Alberta approach by offering these services in and beyond our region in nimble and adaptable ways to meet client and partner needs. It provides related educational programming that connects entrepreneurs and SMEs across the province with learning and sharing opportunities that are directly tied to its areas of expertise. The college's program contributions for this new RINSA funding cycle meet industry demand to startup, grow, and scale enterprises. All events being hosted by the College will take place in a blended virtual and face-to-face environment, utilizing the College's hyflex learning technology, allowing for local and pan-Alberta participation. In addition to RINSA funding, the College will continue to leverage internal and external funding (e.g., provincial and federal grants and fee-for-service contracts) to provide its services.

Economic Development Lethbridge/Tecconnect also pivoted their contribution to the ecosystem with an emphasis on supporting technology centric companies at the stage of scale up and growth in line with their own mandate of economic development retention and expansion. A designated senior position will be developing the support programs/systems and forging partnerships across the province to ensure access to pan-Alberta resources. Through this planning process, it was identified that to ensure a streamlined effort, a resource systems approach would be needed and EDL/RINSA are exploring the development of a Scale Up and Growth digital platform to help more easily track the company journey, access to resources, mentor portals and funding opportunities. The idea of creating a digital platform is the result of both entrepreneurs and consultant feedback that finding a more integrated and collaborative way to track the entrepreneur journey (reducing paperwork and red tape) that not only provided tools and resources for entrepreneurs and business advisors but also provide a means to collect the metrics required to speak more directly to the benefits and interactions of the network, the digital products and services created by the entrepreneurs and economic impacts. The development of such a platform would also mitigate a common complaint by entrepreneurs of the constant telling and re-telling of their story/progress with each service provider/investor providing a centralized place for interactions and planning.

Over time, the network has grown and the challenge of maintaining critical, efficient, and robust relationships is constant. To address this challenge, RINSA actively seeks ways to ensure that connectivity is maintained and new initiatives are supported. Based on feedback from current and past partners through this impact case study, solutions to this challenge have been implemented

including a renewed RINSA website for partner events and resources, new governance guidelines to create a common understanding of responsibilities of membership to the network, and a dedicated shared OneDrive file access to important documents, like minutes and proposals, with a streamlined process for partners to submit agenda items for discussion. Regular monthly meetings have a rotating chair and rotating meeting locations both in-person and virtual options.

RINSA is not a static network and actively looks for opportunities to welcome new members such as The BIPOC Foundation founded by two Lethbridge technology entrepreneurs already familiar with RINSA. They have established new office space in the Tecconnect incubator and are currently providing supports through the "Black Entrepreneurship Program's National Ecosystem Fund" through PrairiesCAN (Gov of Canada) to western provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. RINSA provided a letter of support for this proposal last year and discussions are underway to help this organization expand their services to Indigenous and people of colour in partnership with RINSA though joint pilot program collaborations and funding proposals.

As the three-year funding for the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM (WESTEM) program comes to a close in June, EDL and RINSA have partially secured its future through Alberta Innovates' one-year funding of a pan-provincial initiative, Rural Women Entrepreneurs in Technology (RWEIT) and become a new member to RINSA. This program is leveraging current WESTEM resources to expand across the province with an emphasis on rural women and technology. This does leave a gap in helping women entrepreneurs in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math and there are currently on-going discussions of joint proposals with rural development networks and Canada wide organizations looking to leverage these successful programs through their organizations. Efforts will continue to level the playing field for women living outside of major urban centres to achieve their entrepreneurial goals.

A RINSA member (Renae Barlow) and a southern Alberta Indigenous entrepreneur have been selected to sit on the Alberta Catalyzer Engagement Committee to ensure representation of rural/remote and under-represented entrepreneurs to pre-accelerator programs. The objective of this participation is to ensure entrepreneurs outside of Calgary and Edmonton have equal access to supports and programs that will help their companies accelerate.

RINSA has invited the Siksikaitsitapi-Blackfoot Confederacy Tribal Council to the network to offer support to their newly formed Entrepreneur Steering Committee. A member of this committee is already a Tecconnect Business Advisor and Alberta Catalyzer Engagement Committee member. As well, RINSA will continue working with the Canadian Association of Aboriginal Business to promote their business services and programs as well as the Progressive Aboriginal Relations (PAR) certification to organizations and companies throughout southern Alberta committed to prosperity in Indigenous communities.

Other organizations are also being invited to the network as the ecosystem evolves with new positions including PrairiesCAN Senior Business Officer for southern Alberta, the new Alberta Jobs, Economy and Innovation Manager for all of southern Alberta, the Dhillon School of Business as well as other organization representatives that are emerging with the new funding through both PrairiesCAN and Alberta Innovates EDI programs. Most recently the Calgary Immigrant Women Association was granted funding by PrairiesCAN for pan-provincial (with Lethbridge one of the named cities) support of Immigrant women entrepreneurs and they will be invited to attend RINSA meetings to ensure they understand the opportunities to support their entrepreneurs in southern Alberta.

Another gap identified in the RINSA impact case study was the lack of local scaling/growth investor funding. To that end, RINSA supports the idea of a rural angel investor education program and investment fund development being considered by the Alberta Innovation Network (AIN). RINSA is working collaboratively with two other RINs on this project to create a proposal for this program and pilot the implementation for the benefit of the AIN. The goal is to provide education opportunities to

potential investors in rural communities that will then facilitate them to action investments into rural based startup/scale up and growth technology and innovation companies through each of the local regional innovation networks. This could also include an ecosystem scan of Alberta-centric angel investor organizations that investors could join or provide information about co-op models that could be created regionally or pan-provincially. Plans are to have something developed within the next six months.

One of the key elements of success has been the virtual access to programs and services provided through RINSA. Although this was originally necessitated by the COVID pandemic, this practice saw an increased capacity of rural/remote entrepreneurs to engage and benefit from programs and access to business advisors. Programs and services will continue with an emphasis on hybrid delivery. In lockstep with virtual program delivery is the commitment by various levels of government towards creating accessible broadband to rural/remote areas across Alberta. This provides an opportunity to further extend our reach to under-served entrepreneurs who have experienced accessibility barriers.

Another area highlighted for improvement in the impact case study was the visibility and awareness of RINSA. A more coordinated effort is required to further engage with and encourage technology and innovation entrepreneurs. RINSA is working on a plan to amplify messaging about RINSA through all our partner marketing streams. Each member organization has a network they communicate with and there will be a coordinated effort to ensure information about programs and services is provided in such a way to seamlessly integrate with other marketing efforts. There is an agreed upon understanding between partners that we note and attribute successes to the collaborative efforts through RINSA as we work seamlessly together to support and create growth opportunities for entrepreneurs and companies.

Lastly, RINSA would like to work with Alberta Innovates to continue to build on the data and stories collected in this impact case study report. We would also like to support efforts to bring awareness of this innovative impact case study process that measures not only economic impact, but the beneficial ripple effects experienced throughout the region through collaborative organizations and relationships that focus on technology and innovation.

RINSA views this impact case study report as a catalyst to continue to innovate, re-energize and build collaborations to meet the needs of entrepreneurs and growing companies in the region. It is hoped the recommendations out of this report validate how rural and remote regions are valuable contributors to the technology and innovation entrepreneurial ecosystem across the province and highlights the necessity to enhance and measure impacts that truly reflect the strength of the region.

Epilogue by Michael Kerr, Director, Regional Innovation, Alberta Innovates

Thank you to all of those who have contributed to the work of this Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA) 10-year impact assessment report. This was a large effort that will have relevance for many years to come, not just for RINSA, but for the seven other Regional Innovation Networks (RINs) across the province of Alberta. The report was commissioned with the intent to answer several key questions, including what is the impact of a RIN on its community and what are the key activities or measures that are lead indicators of long term success.

The evidence is clear that a RIN aligned to the initial core principles of being pan-Albertan, community-based, interconnected for sharing and learning, adaptable and governed collaboratively will have a positive outcome in both a short- and long-term impact from a direct, indirect and induced metric. Technology and knowledge-based entrepreneur-centric investment attraction numbers in the report show a solid ROI for the region and the province with over $32 million noted

to date. Also noted is an added value of developing strong relationships, which helps in diversification efforts and resilience to economic forces.

The next three-year agreements for all the RINs were being developed and approved as the results of the report became available and funding justified as a result of some of the metrics attained. Understanding the key focus areas helped develop the work plans. It also had a major influence in identifying the key lead indicator metrics for future reporting. Monitoring these metrics will help in the efficiency of the program as a whole and will drive the lag indicators. In this way, the report will have a built-in legacy for at least the next three years.

Leading economist, Michael Porter, wrote "The Competitive Advantage of Nations". He is cited in many of the meta-analysis reports that led to the concept of a RIN:

> *"Champions are instrumental, the presence of a science and technology infrastructure appears to be a necessary but not sufficient condition. Informal and formal information networks are essential; business-oriented government support can stimulate clustering; it takes a long time; cluster development can be planned."*

The data in this report validates Porter's theory through metrics attained over a 10-year span. It also shows the value of the RIN investment for the province; innovation and entrepreneurship happen everywhere and anywhere, and with the right supports we can build a stronger province.

It has been my privilege to be part of this work and I look forward to the next phase of engagement as we work together to grow a strong ecosystem.

Appendix A: Impact Case Study Questions

The following tables focus on specifying the key questions that were explored in the ICS. The questions build of those listed in Box A and are structured hierarchically around context, activities, and impact. For each set of questions data sources were identified at the outset and these are also listed (although not that not all proved to be useful).

Table A1: Questions for assessing context

Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
• What were the drivers for establishing RINSA?	• What was the political, economic and social context for founding RINSA in 2011? • ….	• How were the relationships within Tecconect managed? and How did these relationships evolve over time? • How did changes in Alberta Innovates mandate and program contribute to the he evolution of RINSA over time? • ….	• Document review (see Annex C) • Data analysis • Key informant interviews • …
• What were the original long-term goals for RINSA? What were the plans for working towards and reaching those goals?	• What were the original barriers to innovation that RINSA was trying to overcome? And how has RINSA contributed to existing facilitators of innovation? • What were the program objectives for RINSA in 2011? • What was the underlying programmatic logic for RINSA in 2011? • What were the resource commitments (economic, in-kind and non-economic) for the founding of RINSA? How have the resources committed to RINSA changed over time? • ….	• What were RINSA's original objectives? How did the program objectives evolve over time? What were the reasons for those changes? • …	• Original AITF application • Other relevant documents e.g. Nordicity 2018 review • Data analysis - Table of objectives and how they have iterated over time • Key informant interviews • …

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Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
• How did RINSA change as the innovation environment and other socioeconomic and political factors changed in southern Alberta? How did those changes benefit RINSA? How did the changes disadvantage RINSA? In hindsight, what do you think could have been done differently and how would that have likely changed what RINSA is today?	• How did the political, economic and social context in southern Alberta change between 2011-2021? • How has the entrepreneurial ecosystem in southern Alberta developed and grown between 2011-2021? [How has the ecosystem evolved?] • ….	• What was the context and background for establishing the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM Strategy in 2019? • In your opinion, what value has the Women Entrepreneurs In STEM Strategy brought to Alberta? • …	• Key informant interviews • Data analysis - Table of objectives and how they have iterated over time • Other relevant documents • …

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Table A2: Questions for assessing activities/mechanisms

Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources

• What were the original activities/mechanisms that RINSA established, supported or sponsored (and over what timeline)?	• What was the 'logic', objectives and processes behind:
	  o Workshops
	  o Providing business advice
	  o Technology Network Advisors
	  o Funding schemes
	  o Women Entrepreneurs in STEM Strategy
	  o Business incubator
	  o …
	
	• How do these processes work together to benefit entrepreneurs and SMEs in Alberta?
	
	• ….
		• For each activity …
		• How did [Activity] address the original barriers to innovation, and amplified (contribute to meeting the needs of entrepreneurs and SMEs) existing facilitators of innovation that RINSA was trying to overcome? If so in what way?
		
		• What activities addressed the unique unmet needs of start-ups in a specific industry? [What are the industries that have unique and unmet needs and how does RINSA meet them?]
		
		• How accessible is funding to entrepreneurs and SMEs, including government funding and angle/VC investment? What could be done to make capital more accessible to entrepreneurs and SMEs?
		
		• How well does [activity] deliver and provide client support? What could be done to improve this activity?
		
		• Are clients getting and finding the right supports at the right
			• Original AITF application and project reports
			• Internal governance papers and reports
			• Key informant interviews
			• Data analysis including potential topic modelling of innovation award applications
			• ….

Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
		time? Are we doing it well and is it helping the community and province-wide network? What could be done to improve clients' access to the right support at the right time? • In your opinion, What does access to Network (partners, events, alumni engagement) look like? • In what way did each [activity] contribute to regional development, place and absorptive capacity • …	
• How did these original activities evolve over the 10 years since RINSA was founded, and what were the reasons for change?	• How has RINSA evolved over time? • What activities are most needed and valued by entrepreneurs and SMEs? How did these adapt over time? • How do the RINSA partners provide innovation-driven entrepreneurs and SMEs with the needed resources and assistance in an effective and efficient manner across the entire region?		• Key informant interviews • Internal governance papers and reports • AITF project reports

Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
	• How does RINSA help entrepreneurs and SMEs bridge the scaleup gap? Identify the resource gap? What gaps still exist? • To what extent has RINSA purposefully included population with historically low entrepreneurial representation? (to include Indigenous people, women, and rural dwellers) • How helpful were the six principles in shaping the 'way of working' for RINSA?		
• What are the lessons learned and actionable insights for future RINs?	• How useful is it for individual RINs to work with each other across networks? What are examples of benefits? What are examples when the collaboration was less than effective? What could be done to improve those situations? • How well is RINSA networked with industry, SMEs, researchers, and other entrepreneurs? How could RINSA provide better networking experiences for industry, SMEs, researchers and other entrepreneurs?		• Key informant interviews

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Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
	• How well does the AIN network work together? How could the AIN network improve its collaboration? • How effective are RINSAs governance arrangements? How could governance be improved?		

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Table A3: Questions for assessing impact

Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
• What were the non-economic and economic benefits of RINSA?	• To what extent has RINSA interventions (activities/mechanisms) addressed and overcome the originally perceived barriers to innovation and amplified (contributed to) existing facilitators of innovation? • What significant outcomes or impact has RINSA's activities resulted in? • How has RINSA made a difference in overcoming traditional weaknesses of Canada's innovation performance e.g., lack of scaleup and (SME?) business investment; weak business led governance; underdeveloped supply chains; poor support for talent; lack of focus and branding; weak networks (Knubley, 2021)[36]. • How well does the network deliver program services to entrepreneurs and SMEs? • What are the effective diversity and inclusion efforts that should be utilized to address inequity within	• Is there evidence of increased rates of start-up survivability? What factors are contributing to the increase? • Are there new client connections because of the RINSA? What value has the new client connections brought to Alberta's economy? • Have client relationships been enriched because of the RINSA? What do enriched client relationships look like? • How has RINSA created better connections with clients? What value are these connections to clients? • Do clients have access to RIN resources overall and within their region, at a community level? • Do companies in one RIN get referred to another RIN to get help with development, capital access, and/or commercialization needs? – provide examples • To what extent are RINSA clients satisfied with the services they have received? How could services be improved?	• Key informant interviews • Document review e.g., analysis of annual reports, RIN survey results • Analysis of data [TBD] • Network analysis and economic impact analysis

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[36] Knubley, J. 2021. Building Superclusters for Canada. Brookfield Institute. *https://brookfieldinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/Superclusters_Final2.pdf*

Primary question	Secondary questions	Tertiary questions	Data sources
	the entrepreneurship ecosystem? What are the ineffective efforts? • In what way has the COVID-19 pandemic impact on the economic and non-economic impacts of RINSA? • ….	• …	
• What RINSA activities did not work? What were the likely reasons those activities did not work? How could they be changed to get a different outcome? What were the unintended impacts, positive and negative?	• Has RINSA met its original objectives and key performance indicators (if they existed)? • What are the program innovations that bring the most effective and efficient solutions to entrepreneurs and SMEs? • …		• Key informant interviews • Data analysis - Table of objectives and how they have iterated over time • ….
• How did the interrelationship between the context and activities help or hinder the impact of the RINSA?	• What progress through the client journey, due to network assistance, have clients experienced? Or How has RINSA contributed to the progression of its clients in their journey to success? • Has competition between RINs hindered or helped their development? • What is the future relationship between accelerators and RINs? • …		• Key informant interviews

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Appendix B: Interview protocols

Email to invite people to be interviewed:

Dear XXXX,

My name is [name] and I am a Senior Evaluator with Alberta Innovates. I am part of a team working on an Impact Case Study designed to document the value of RINSA over the past 10 years. This includes talking with people in confidence about their experiences with RINSA and its programs, as well as exploration of RINSA's relationships with network partners, entrepreneurs, and the local community.

[name] suggested you would be a great person from whom I could learn more about RINSA. I would truly value the opportunity to talk with you.

I have cc'd [name] on this email. She is kind enough to work with people to find a convenient time for the confidential interviews. We are booking the interviews for 60 minutes to ensure we have enough time to fully explore experiences with, thoughts about, and feedback for RINSA.

I truly hope to have the opportunity to talk with you about RINSA.

Please feel free to contact me if you have questions about this project before the scheduled interview date.

Best regards,
Shannon
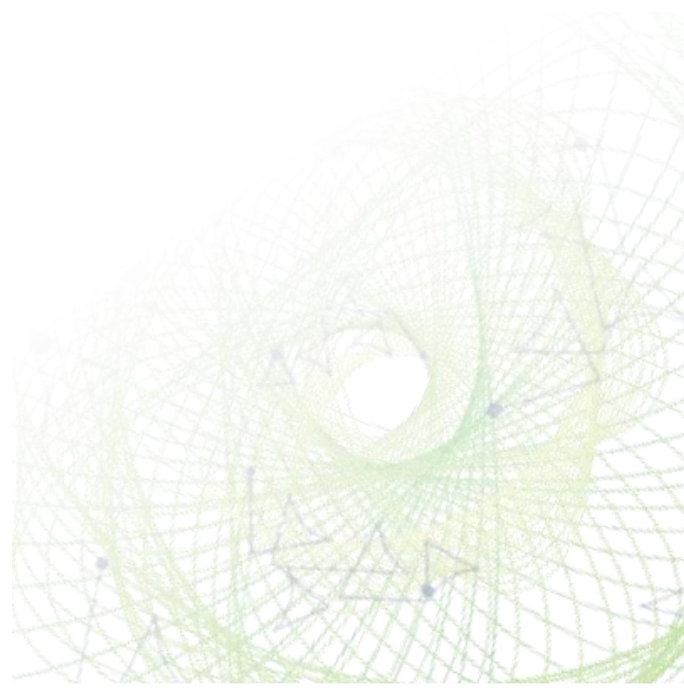
Version 1.0 Interview Guide (for early RINSA members who are identified as providing historical perspective)

The Story of You with RINSA
Please tell me about your involvement and history with RINSA?
What has been the most challenging aspect(s) of your involvement with RINSA?
How did you meet those challenges?
How do you feel about the outcomes from that?
What has been the most rewarding aspect(s) of your involvement with RINSA?
What made those so rewarding?
In hindsight, what would have you done differently regarding your involvement with RINSA?

RINSA Early days
Thinking back to the very early days, from your perspective, what were the drivers for establishing RINSA (considering the political, economic, and social context and your personal perspective influencing RINSA's development and evolution over time)?
How did the local innovation environment, socioeconomic and political factors influence the movement to create an innovation network in and around Lethbridge that led to RINSA?
What were the original needs for (potential) entrepreneurs prior to the creation of Tecconnect and RINSA?
What did the early network do to meet these needs?
What were the results of the actions taken (what worked well and not so well)?
In hindsight, what could have been done differently?
In your opinion, what was/were the most important facilitator(s)/activity(ies) that helped RINSA get going?
What made those facilitators so important?
What were the challenges RINSA faced to getting going?
How did RINSA work to overcome the challenges?
How successful were those efforts?
From your perspective, what lessons were learned at this time?
What relationships did you see forming between local community organizations and Tecconnect in the early years?
How were all the relationships managed?
What lessons were learned from the early relationship building?
From your perspective, how helpful was Alberta Innovates in getting RINSA started?
What lessons were learned from Alberta Innovates' early involvement with RINSA?
From your perspective, how helpful were the other ecosystem partners in getting RINSA started?
What lessons were learned from early involvement with ecosystem partners?
Generally thinking, in hindsight, what do you think could have been done differently during the early days of the development of RINSA?
How do you think RINSA would be different today (if at all) if other options or paths were taken in the early days?

RINSA evolution over the past 10 years
From your perspective, how has the entrepreneurial/innovation ecosystem in southern Alberta changed over the past 10 years?
What value do you think RINSA activities (e.g., workshops, business advisors, business incubator, etc.) have had for the local community over the past 10 years?
How have the original activities evolved over time (please provide examples and details if possible)?
What were the reasons for the changes to the activities?
What changes were outside the control of RINSA (e.g., changes to political interests, etc.)?
What changes were within the control of RINSA?
In your opinion, how valuable were the changes (both outside and within the control of RINSA) to the network?
What lessons learned can you share about the different RINSA activities?
How have the relationships within RINSA evolved over time?
How did the relationships within Tecconnect and between Tecconnect and others in the community evolve over time?
What worked well with these relationships?

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What challenges did these relationships face?
How were the relationship challenges addressed?
What were the results of the actions taken to address the challenges?
What lessons learned can you share about these relationships?
How has the relationship with Alberta Innovates evolved over time?
What worked well with this relationship?
What challenges were faced?
How were the challenges addressed?
What were the results of the actions taken?
What lessons learned can you share about this relationship?
How has RINSAs governance arrangements evolved over time?
In your opinion, how effective have RINSA's governance arrangements been?
How could governance be improved?

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Activities
In your opinion, what value has the inclusion of Indigenous members brought to RINSA?
What lessons learned can you share regarding this diversification of the network?
In your opinion, what value has the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM brought to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta as a whole?
What lessons learned can you share regarding the initiative?
In your opinion, what value has the newcomers/immigrant program brought to southern Alberta region? To Alberta?
What lessons learned can you share regarding the newcomers/immigrant program?
In your opinion, what value has the AGILITY program brought to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta?
What lessons learned can you share regarding this initiative?
In your opinion, what value has the AgENT program brought to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta?
What lessons learned can you share regarding this initiative?
What other Tecconnect/RINSA activities/initiatives do you think demonstrate the values of equity, diversity and inclusion?
What lessons learned can be shared regarding other activities/initiatives?

RINSA in the Future
What future do you see for RINSA?
How do you see RINSA working toward that future?
What facilitators do you think will be available to RINSA to achieve its desired goals in the future?
What potential challenges do you think RINSA will face while working towards its goals?
What do you think is out there to help RINSA overcome the potential challenges?
Are there other things you'd like to add regarding your experiences with the network or the network more generally?

Version 2.0 Interview Guide (for current RINSA members and ecosystem partners speaking to the present and future)

The Story of You with RINSA
Please tell me about your involvement and history with RINSA?
What has been the most challenging aspect(s) of your involvement with RINSA?
How did you meet those challenges?
How do you feel about the outcomes from that?
What has been the most rewarding aspect(s) of your involvement with RINSA?
What made those so rewarding?
In hindsight, what would have you done differently regarding your involvement with RINSA?

RINSA Current State
Addressing Drivers/Needs
What are the current drivers for keeping RINSA going (considering the political, economic, and social context and your personal perspective)?
How do the local innovation environment, socioeconomic and political factors influence the ongoing existence of RINSA?
What needs currently exist for (potential) entrepreneurs that RINSA can meet?
Is RINSA currently working to meet these needs? If so, how?
What are examples of the results of the actions taken to meet the needs (what is working well and not so well)?
What needs could RINSA possibly meet that it is not?
If you could change something in the way RINSA is currently operating, what would that be?

Relationships
How well are the current relationships between local community organizations, Tecconnect, and RINSA functioning?
What lessons are being learned from the current relationship building and functioning?
From your perspective, how helpful is Alberta Innovates to RINSA?
What lessons are being learned from working with Alberta Innovates?
From your perspective, how useful is it for all the RINs across Alberta to work with each other?
Please provide examples of benefits.
Please provide examples when the collaboration between RINs was less than effective.
What can be done to improve the collaboration between the RINs?
From your perspective, how helpful are the other ecosystem partners to RINSA?
What lessons are being earned from working with these ecosystem partners?
How well do you think RINSA is networked with industry? With SMEs? With researchers? With entrepreneurs in other regions?
How could RINSA provide better networking experiences for industry? For SMEs? For researchers? For entrepreneurs in other regions?

Effectiveness
What value do you think RINSA activities (e.g., workshops, business advisors, business incubator, etc.) bring to the local community, including entrepreneurs and SMEs?
If you could enhance current programs, what would you do?
How has RINSA made a difference in overcoming traditional weaknesses of Canada's innovation performance (e.g., lack of scaleup and SME business investment, weak business governance, underdeveloped supply chains, poor support for talent, lack of focus and branding, weak networks)?
In your opinion, what are the most important facilitator(s)/activity(ies) that help RINSA be successful?
What makes those facilitators so important?
What are the challenges RINSA faces right now (COVID-19 and otherwise)?
How is RINSA working to overcome these challenges?
How successful are those efforts?
From your perspective, what lessons are being learned at this time?
In your opinion, how effective are RINSAs governance arrangements?
How could governance be improved?

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What are some examples of significant outcomes or impacts that RINSA's activities have resulted in?
Examples of start-up survivability.
Effective client connections with other RINs and available resources that benefit clients and Alberta's economy.
Enriched client relationships.
Effective use of RINSA resources for the betterment of clients and the community (e.g., helping clients in their journey to success).
Client satisfaction with services received.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Activities
In your opinion, what value does the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM bring to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta as a whole?
What lessons learned can you share regarding the initiative?
In your opinion, what value does the newcomers/immigrant program bring to southern Alberta region? To Alberta?
What lessons learned can you share regarding the newcomers/immigrant program?
In your opinion, what value does the AGILITY program bring to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta?
What lessons learned can you share regarding this initiative?
In your opinion, what value does the AgENT program bring to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta?
What lessons learned can you share regarding this initiative?
In your opinion, what value does the inclusion of Indigenous members bring to RINSA?
What lessons learned can you share regarding this diversification of the network?
What other Tecconnect/RINSA activities/initiatives do you think demonstrate the values of equity, diversity and inclusion?
What lessons learned can be shared regarding other activities/initiatives?

RINSA in the Future
If you think of a southern Alberta community without RINSA, what do you think that would look like?
What future do you see for RINSA?
How do you see RINSA working toward that future?
What facilitators do you think will be available to RINSA to achieve its desired goals in the future?
What potential challenges do you think RINSA will face while working towards its goals?
What do you think is out there to help RINSA overcome the potential challenges?
How do you see RINSA interacting with provincial accelerators and incubators?
What value would these interactions bring to clients? To Alberta's economy?
Are there other things you'd like to add regarding your experiences with the network or the network more generally?

Version 3.0 Interview Guide (for current entrepreneurs/clients speaking to past, present and future experiences)

<u>The Story of You with RINSA</u>
Please tell me about your involvement and history with RINSA?
What has been the most challenging aspect(s) of your involvement with RINSA?
How did you meet those challenges?
How do you feel about the outcomes from that?
What has been the most rewarding aspect(s) of your involvement with RINSA?
What made those so rewarding?
In hindsight, what would have you done differently regarding your involvement with RINSA?

<u>RINSA Current State</u>

Addressing Drivers/Needs
What are the current drivers for keeping RINSA going (considering the political, economic, and social context and your personal perspective)?
How do the local innovation environment, socioeconomic and political factors influence the ongoing existence of RINSA?
What needs currently exist for (potential) entrepreneurs that RINSA can meet?
Do you think RINSA is currently working to meet these needs? If so, how?
What needs could RINSA possibly meet that it is not?
If you could change something in the way RINSA is currently operating, what would that be?

Relationships
From your experience, how well do you think RINSA works with local community organizations, Tecconnect, and other resources across the province?
From your perspective, how well do you think Alberta Innovates works with RINSA?
From your perspective, how useful is it for all the RINs across Alberta to work with each other?
What can be done to improve the collaboration between the RINs?
How well do you think RINSA is networked with industry? With SMEs? With researchers? With entrepreneurs in other regions?
How could RINSA provide better networking experiences for industry? For SMEs? For researchers? For entrepreneurs in other regions?

Effectiveness
What value do you think RINSA activities (e.g., workshops, business advisors, business incubator, etc.) bring to the local community, including entrepreneurs and SMEs?
If you could enhance current programs, what would you do?
How has RINSA made a difference in overcoming traditional weaknesses of Canada's innovation performance (e.g., lack of scaleup and SME business investment, weak business governance, underdeveloped supply chains, poor support for talent, lack of focus and branding, weak networks)?
In your opinion, what are the most important facilitator(s)/activity(ies) that help RINSA be successful?
What makes those facilitators so important?
What are the challenges RINSA faces right now (COVID-19 and otherwise)?
How do you see RINSA working to overcome these challenges?
How successful do you think those efforts are?
What are some examples of significant outcomes or impacts that RINSA's activities have resulted in?
Examples of start-up survivability.
Effective client connections with other RINs and available resources that benefit clients and Alberta's economy.
Enriched client relationships.
Effective use of RINSA resources for the betterment of clients and the community (e.g., helping clients in their journey to success).
Client satisfaction with services received.

<u>Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Activities</u>

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In your opinion, what value does the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM bring to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta as a whole?

In your opinion, what value does the newcomers/immigrant program bring to southern Alberta region? To Alberta?

In your opinion, what value does the AGILITY program bring to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta?

In your opinion, what value does the AgENT program bring to the southern Alberta region? To Alberta?

In your opinion, what value does the inclusion of Indigenous members bring to RINSA?

What other Tecconnect/RINSA activities/initiatives do you think demonstrate the values of equity, diversity and inclusion?

RINSA in the Future

If you think of a southern Alberta community without RINSA, what do you think that would look like?

What future do you see for RINSA?

How do you see RINSA working toward that future?

What facilitators do you think will be available to RINSA to achieve its desired goals in the future?

What potential challenges do you think RINSA will face while working towards its goals?

What do you think is out there to help RINSA overcome the potential challenges?

How do you see RINSA interacting with provincial accelerators and incubators?

What value would these interactions bring to clients? To Alberta's economy?

Are there other things you'd like to add regarding your experiences with the network or the network more generally?

Appendix C: List of documents reviewed

Over 190 documents were reviewed but many did not contain information that was highly relevant to the impact case study (e.g., meeting agendas, minutes, and such like). These items were therefore not coded. The list of documents below are those that were reviewed, coded, and contributed to the impact case study.

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RINSA. (2019b). *Regional Innovation Progress Metrics: April 1, 2019 – September 30, 2019*.

RINSA. (2019c). *RIN Semi-Annual Progress Report*.

RINSA. (2020a). *Regional Innovation Progress Metrics: October 1, 2019 – March 10, 2020*.

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Appendix D: Methods of the analysis of network analysis

The network analysis had three objectives. First, it aimed to describe the current state of the RINSA network, with an emphasis on network characteristics that likely generate benefits for firms and entrepreneurs. That part of the analysis helped map various elements of the network and speak to the way collaboration can create potential benefits for clients. Second, the network analysis helped show the evolution of RINSA over time. Finally, piloting a network analysis approach allowed the team to identify what conditions and mechanisms would have to be in place in the future to use this research method effectively for evaluating RINSA or other innovation networks. Box E.1 provides some of the key definitions used in the analysis.

Box D1 – Summary of key definitions used in the network analysis

A RINSA member or RINSA member organization is one of the twelve organizations currently part of RINSA: University of Lethbridge; Tecconnect (Economic Development Lethbridge – EDL); Lethbridge College; NRC-IRAP; Alberta Innovates; Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce; Okotoks Economic Development; Piikani Resource Development and Blood Tribe Economic Development; Community Futures (Lethbridge Region); Southgrow Regional Initiative and Alberta Southwest Regional Economic Development.

A non-RINSA organization or non-RINSA partner is another entity whose mandate relates to supporting firms (in southern Alberta or elsewhere), but that is not amongst the twelve RINSA members. These organizations are still within the boundary of the RINSA network as collaborators to the RINSA organizations and other sources of support in the ecosystem.

For the purposes of this analysis, a **RINSA client** designates a firm or entrepreneur having benefitted from the services or support of at least one RINSA member organization. This definition covers entrepreneurs and businesses that have accessed the support of any RINSA member.

Methods and Limitations

Network analysis is a set of mathematical theories and techniques that allows researchers to examine the nature, extent and structure of connections between a set of actors. Those connections (or links or ties or relations) can exist between different types of actors – whether individuals, organizations, groups, etc. Network analysis can be used to study a variety of types of connections, such as trust relationships, collaborations, flow of information, flow of resources, overlapping membership, etc. Network analysis allows researchers to hypothesize about the cause and effect of interactions among actors in a network.

Following the launch of the RINSA network analysis, the team assessed the availability of data. Importantly, not all RINSA members capture administrative data about their interactions with clients and partners. Experience in surveying RINSA clients has demonstrated that the network analysis team could not hope to achieve a very high response rate if it had attempted to survey clients (who were deemed already over-surveyed at the time of the exercise). High response rates are mandatory to achieve a full network analysis with reliable metrics. Given these factors, the network analysis approach was broken down into four distinct sub-approaches that are described below.

Direct data collection to describe the interactions between RINSA member organizations

This part of the network analysis examined the relationships between RINSA members, focusing on those interactions that helped generate value for clients over the previous three years (2018-2021). This information was collected through a standard questionnaire. This exercise offers baseline RINSA network data, but with two key limitations:

- Community Futures Lethbridge Region (RINSA member) was unable to participate in the network analysis. Other organizations described their interactions with Community Futures, but no information was

collected directly from Community Futures on how the organization interacts with RINSA and non-RINSA partners. This means that Community Futures Lethbridge Region looks more 'isolated' in most network visualizations, but that is an artefact of missing data – not a reflection of reality.

- Although the network analysis team used consistent questionnaires and Likert scales to collect information, the responses obtained directly from RINSA members and business leads was likely impacted by recall issues and differences in perceptions and interpretation – especially since questions covered long periods of time. Some respondents might not have been aware of all interactions or might have forgotten some of them. Some of the RINSA firms could not recall with precision which organizations they had been in contact with. However, in the absence of a database capturing all RINSA interactions, asking stakeholders directly was a valid option. This only means that results have to be interpreted carefully.

Direct data collection and use of secondary data describing interactions between RINSA members and non-RINSA partner organizations.

RINSA members were asked about their three most important non-RINSA partner organizations. In addition, data was extracted from the interim and annual RINSA reports to describe a part of the RINSA network over time (this was done using a template presented in Appendix F). The retrospective analysis helps show what interactions have taken place in a segment of the RINSA network from 2016 to 2022.

- *Limitations:* RINSA reporting was not developed for the purpose of network analysis. The annual and interim RINSA reports are qualitative, narrative reports. To conduct the retrospective analysis, Alberta Innovates had to extract and convert the information from the reports into a dataset suitable for network analysis. This exercise was labour-intensive and required a significant amount of reflection and interpretation since the reports were not always clear or consistent in terms of relationship information. Only the information found in the reports could be transferred into network analysis data, and we know that some key, multi-year interactions might have been understated in certain reports.

- *Limitations:* RINSA reports only reflect interactions involving at least one of the three funded partners: the University, the College and Tecconnect. As long as one of those three partners were involved in an interaction (e.g., co-funding, co-organizing an event, offering services, etc.), the interaction was captured in the reports (including interactions with non-RINSA organizations). However, interactions taking place between other RINSA member organizations (e.g., between the Chamber and SouthGrow, or between the Indigenous Economic Development organizations) are not captured in this data. This thus gives a partial view of the RINSA network over time. The primary current-state data collected from RINSA members through the interviews helped fill this gap.

Use of secondary data to look at interactions between RINSA members and their clients

Not all RINSA member organizations have a list of clients to whom they provide services or supports. Some organizations do have a list but cannot share it, others have a partial list of clients (e.g., only organizations that received funding). Some RINSA client lists have descriptive information (e.g., sector, size, stage of entrepreneurial journey), while others only have client names. This great variation in terms of sources of information makes it impossible to map out the RINSA network completely. The network analysis captured some data (six data sets; three of which partial) to depict only a part of this larger network, as well as Tecconnect ego-networks (the most complete data set). These network graphs only illustrate segments of the RINSA network.

Direct data collection to develop five illustrative ego-networks of RINSA clients, based on relationships that helped those entrepreneurs on their innovation journey.

The team developed ego-networks for five selected firms, to speak to network effects from a client perspective. The firms were selected among volunteers from the regular RINSA client survey administered by Alberta Innovates. Firms were selected based on size, sector, and stage of development – to try and capture different profiles. The ego-network questionnaire administered to the firms (Appendix F) asked about interactions with 1) the twelve RINSA members, 2) non-RINSA partners organizations (list of all external partners identified by RINSA member organizations) and 3) any other key organizations that had supported the firm in its innovation journey.

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Appendix E: Methodology for the economic impact analysis of RINSA

The retrospective economic impact analysis leveraged the input-output modeling framework based on Statistics Canada's provincial (Alberta) input-output tables. Two primary sources of economic impact were identified upon preliminary research of RINSA's policies and programs:

1) Expenditures to support various programs and activities, including business advisory, training, and provision of network opportunities; and,

    Supports extended to start-ups and small businesses for commercialization such as assistance in attracting investments and business advisory.

The data for modeling impact drivers were collected through strategy documents, progress and year-end reports released by RINSA, and client surveys on business performance.

The economic impact analysis model was developed using StatsCan's provincial Input/Output Table for Alberta. The economic impact analysis is based on the following four main elements.

- Development of a ***Conceptual Design*** outlining the conceptual framework on which the economic impact analysis was structured.
- Formulation of a ***Data Collection Methodology*** process to capture and process relevant quantitative data from the available sources.
- Development of the ***Modeling and Analysis*** approach to estimate benefits associated with RINSA's activities, such as commercialization revenues and investments, leading to the production of yearly economic estimates for the retrospective years 2011-2021, representing RINSA's fiscal year-end.
- Identifying the ***Limitations*** of economic impact estimates in terms of measuring expenditures associated with RINSA's activities and their impact on innovation/commercialization.

Conceptual Design

The first step of the economic impact analysis involved the development of a conceptual framework based on a complete understanding and review of documents elucidating RINSA's operations, and program activities.

The conceptual framework combined preliminary research, assessment techniques, and identification of key indicators for benefit estimation, leading to the analysis of RINSA's economic impact on southern Alberta.

As shown in Figure E1, the potential impacts of RINSA's program on Alberta's Innovation Ecosystem were determined through data collection, analysis and benchmarking. Data collected upon the review of RINSA's strategy documents, reports and client survey data was used to estimate the key inputs to the economic impact analysis model. Assumptions were formulated to impute missing data and address potential bias in the data sources. The input-output modeling framework was used to estimate economic impact of RINSA's initiatives. This was followed by benchmarking analysis based on related case studies, which helped validate key assumptions and findings. Benefits from commercialization and economic activities generated through program expenditures were identified as the main drivers of RINSA's economic impact.

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Figure E1: Conceptual Framework for Economic Impact Analysis
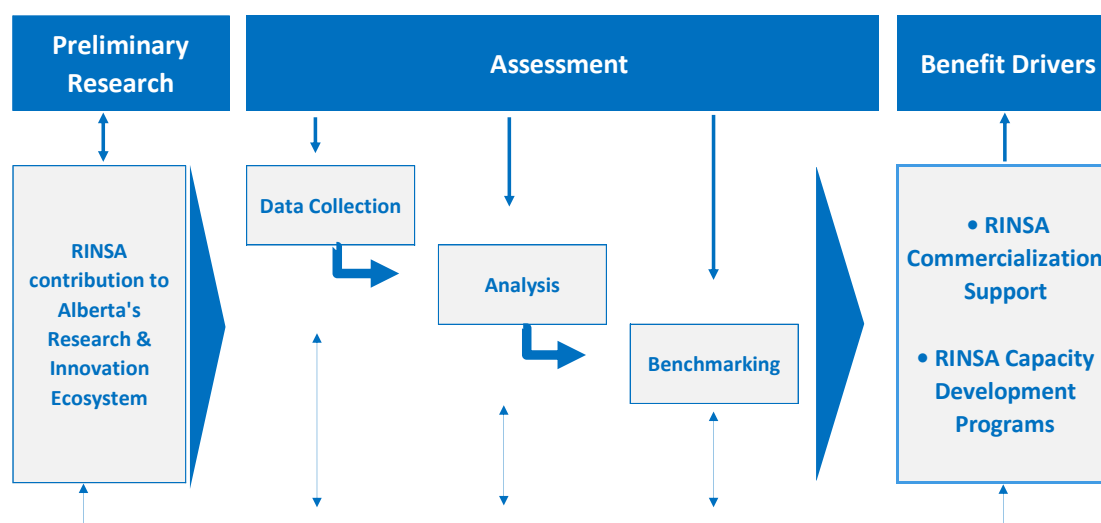
Data Collection Methodology

The retrospective economic impact analysis presented in this report leveraged the following data sources:

Document Review

Documents reviewed included RINSA progress/year-end reports and strategy documents to articulate RINSA's objectives of its various initiatives, including the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM program (WESTEM) and the Alberta Entrepreneur Incubator program (AEI).

RINSA Data Review

The following documents were used to extract data to generate inputs for economic impact analysis:

- **Milestone Reports:** Data on program expenditures were extracted from milestone reports and reconciled with individual agreements between RINSA and AI was done in close consultation with RINSA. Year in Review reports (2021) for EDL/Tecconnect was used to extract financial data (revenue, investments) of incubator clients

- **Surveys:** The responses to the following surveys were analyzed to extract financial data (Revenue, Investments) with respect to commercialization support facilitated by RINSA activities.

  - RINSA Client Survey (2020-2021)
  - AEI Company Intake Survey (2017-2019)
  - WESTEM Client Survey (2020-2021)

- There were several gaps in terms of sufficiency of data for a more comprehensive 10- year retrospective economic impact analysis of RINSA's activities[37]. Based on consultation with AI's project team GGI, these gaps were addressed as follows:
  - Imputed missing data to reconcile expenditures with the contribution amounts; and,
  - Developed assumption to disaggregate consolidated financial data into appropriate activities for economic impact analysis.

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[37] For example, the data on program expenditures in Annual Reports from October 2011 to March 2015 did not match with the contribution agreement amounts. Similarly, for the agreement period (2016-2019), the data on actual expenditures did not align with contribution amounts due to missing data for the fiscal year 2016-2017. Another missing data point was actual expenditures for Alberta Entrepreneur Incubator Program in fiscal year 2017-2018.

Modeling and Analysis

Based on the data compiled from the documents, the detailed economic analysis model was developed. The overarching modeling approach to complete the economic impact analysis is presented in Figure E2.

Figure E2: Modelling Approach for Retrospective Economic Impact Analysis
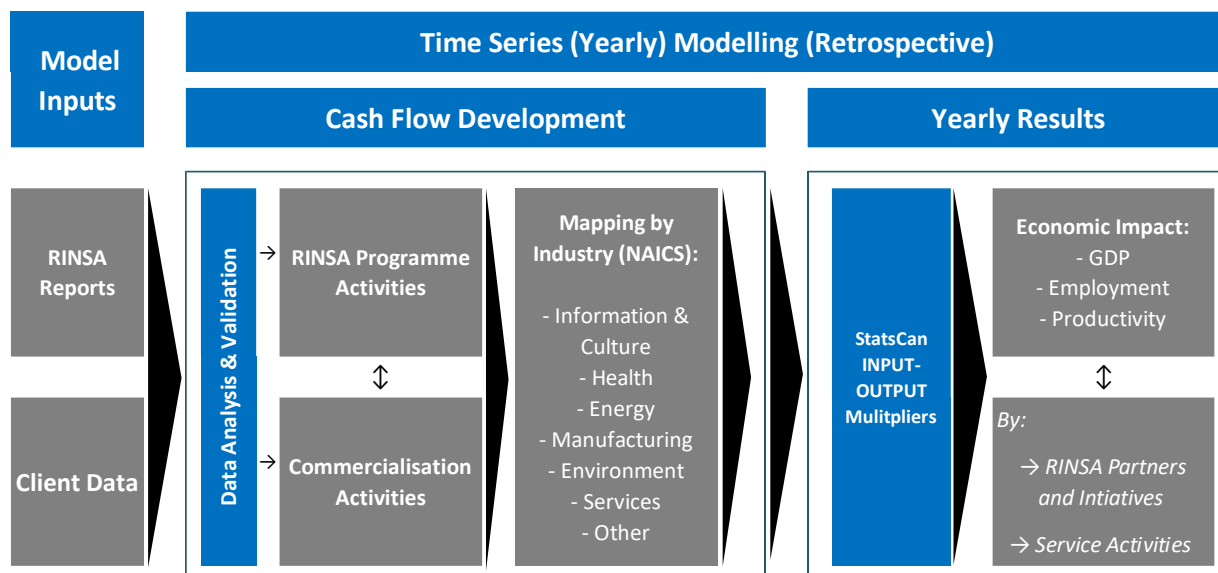
The data collected from the above-mentioned sources were disaggregated and compiled under the following categories:

- **RINSA's Operations:** Included expenditures incurred on general operations as well as expenditures related to the capacity development programs, including training, business advisory, and upskilling initiatives.

- **Commercialization Activities:** Represented financial data (investments and revenues) of the clients (entrepreneurs and businesses) supported by RINSA's program activities.

This data obtained from sources listed under Data Collection Methodology was analyzed and validated to develop cash flow estimates for RINSA's yearly program activities and support provided for the commercialization.

Compiled by type of activities (RINSA programs) and by industry (commercialization activities), these cashflows were then mapped to sector level classifications of North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS) Canada 2022 Version 1.[38]

Economic impact analysis was based on the input-output modelling approach that uses provincial symmetric Input-Output Tables (2017) published by Statistics Canada in 2021. The economic impact analysis is disaggregated into the direct, indirect, and induced effects as described below:

- **Direct impacts:** Refers to GDP and employment generated because of direct expenditures on value addition by RINSA including partners/ initiatives on its programs and by the clients supported through those programs.[39]

- **Indirect impacts:** Refers to economic impact (GDP and employment) due to economic activities stimulated by the RINSA in its upstream suppliers.

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[38] North American Industry Classification System (NAICS) Canada 2022 Version 1.0 released Jan 27, 2022 - accessed at *https://www.statcan.gc.ca/en/subjects/standard/naics/2022/v1/index*

[39] Due to limited disaggregation of available data, imputation was done based on the ratio of direct value added to revenue by a sector (NAICS) as per Alberta's Input-Output 2017 tables published by Statistics Canada.

- **Induced impacts:** Refers to GDP and employment generated through the re-spending of income earned by the participants in the direct and indirect components. Induced impacts arise from re-spending that occurs in the economy at the household level, e.g., employees of RINSA and its clients using their income to purchase goods and services in the general economy.
- **Total economic impact:** The total economic impact equals the sum of the direct, indirect, and induced economic impacts.

Finally, the outcome is expressed in terms of GDP, employment, and productivity improvements by type of activities (capacity development and commercialization support) and by RINSA partner or initiatives (RINSA, WESTEM & EDL/Tecconnect).

Limitations

The main objective of the retrospective economic impact analysis is to:

a) present reasonable estimates of RINSA's contribution to the southern Alberta economy in terms of GDP, employment, and productivity impact for the period 2011-2021; and,

b) identify appropriate metrics, impact measures, analytical framework, and data collection strategies to make future analyses more robust.

Due to data gaps and limitations as outlined below, we believe the economic impact analysis results provided in this report present a conservative estimate of RINSA's contribution to the southern Alberta economy.

The lack of disaggregated data on **program expenditures** from 2011-12 to 2017-18 restricted the ability of the model to separate economic impact of expenditure by the type of activity. Consequently, disaggregation of such expenditures into different economic activities was based on assumptions developed according to best estimates. Although the overall economic impact analysis presents a reasonable and fair view of RINSA's contribution, fully disaggregated data would have allowed a more accurate measurement of GDP impact by activities type.

Data constraints(gaps) around **the business performance** of RINSA clients restricted the depth of year over year analysis required to link RINSA's program expenditures (activities) to client's commercialization benefits, i.e., investment and revenues enabled by RINSA's commercialization support services. Accordingly, conservative estimates for commercialization benefits were developed based on the insights drawn from the 2021 survey responses. A more detailed survey with a higher response rate[40] for multiple retrospective years would have further enhanced the reasonableness of the estimates for commercialization benefits.

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[40] For example, the 2021 Client survey which was used to develop commercialization benefit estimates had low (24%) response rate - out of 341 target survey only 83 completed responses were received at the close of the survey despite four email reminders followed by targeted requests to respondents to complete the survey. However, the survey data was not inflated by any factor to represent the universe. This means the results presented in this study present a very conservative view of RINSA's contribution in terms of economic impact (GDP, Employment and Productivity).

APPENDIX F: RINSA Timeline Narrative

RINSA TIMELINE NARRATIVE
REGIONAL INNOVATION NETWORK OF SOUTHERN ALBERTA

APRIL 2022

INTRODUCTION

The Regional Innovation Network of Southern Alberta (RINSA) was formed in 2011 as a collaborative, funded partnership between Alberta Innovates and Economic Development Lethbridge/Tecconnect, Lethbridge College, and the University of Lethbridge. It has since grown to 12 partner organizations and over 75 community collaborators.

Background

RINSA is one of eight Regional Innovation networks (RINs) across the province under the umbrella of the Alberta Innovation Network (AIN) supported by Alberta Innovates. The RINs are entrepreneur-centric, community-based networks with the goal of providing programs and services to accelerate growth of technology and knowledge-based businesses in those jurisdictions. Each RIN is made up of like-minded public organizations. They are passionate about helping small technology and knowledge-based businesses innovate and grow, diversifying the economy and helping build a strong entrepreneurial culture in Alberta.

www.rinsa.ca

TIMELINE NARRATIVE

The purpose of this timeline narrative is to provide a high-level overview of some key global, federal, provincial, and local context that influenced and aided RINSA's evolution over the past 10 years. This timeline is not comprehensive; rather, it gives a 'flavour' of the macro-, meso-, and micro-level ecosystems that RINSA has operated, and does operate, within. Specifically, the timeline narrative weaves together eight categories that when presented chronologically tell the story of RINSA:

Major Ecosystem Events (macro-level): Canadian and global events that were/are the impetus of major changes that contributed to the evolution of RINSA.

Ecosystem Strategic Shifts (meso-level): Strategic actions taken by Canadian and Alberta governments and Alberta Innovates in response to the major macro-level ecosystem events.

Trending Ecosystem Events (meso-level): Events within Alberta and the rest of Canada intended to promote and advance Alberta's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

RINSA Team Technology Development (micro-level): Technology advancements facilitated by RINSA to enable enhanced service delivery.

RINSA Team Events (micro-level): Events and activities facilitated and/or funded by RINSA to enhance service delivery to benefit local entrepreneurs and clients, and Alberta's entrepreneurial ecosystem. This component includes events whereby RINSA was a pioneer leading a trend and teaching others (**Team Leading Events).

Recognition of Lethbridge Regions Entrepreneurial Ecosystem (micro-level): Examples of recognition for the contributions the Lethbridge region has made to the local entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Major Monetary Events (micro-level): The provincial and federal granting agreements for RINSA's funding cycles (2011-2015, 2015-2016, 2016-2019, 2019-2022, and most recently 2022-2025)

RINSA's story begins prior to the first funding agreement with Alberta Innovates in 2011, then evolves in segments that align to the funding agreement periods of 2011–2016[1], 2016–2019, and 2019–2022. This narrative of RINSA's story will end just before the signing of the latest three-year granting agreement with Alberta Innovates beginning in April 2022.

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[1] Given that the granting agreement in 2015-2016 was to bridge RINSA funds to the next three-year RIN funding cycle of 2016-2019, for simplicity of presentation the first funding timeframe in this narrative includes both 2011-2015 and 2015-2016.

AN IDEA IN THE MAKING

In the 1990s, southern Alberta community business and academic leaders were talking about the need for a network to pool their knowledge, experience, and resources to support regional entrepreneurs more effectively and efficiently. The idea of strengthening the links between education, research, and industry was evolving at the provincial level also, beginning with the 2000 Alberta Ingenuity Fund.

Over the next decade, efforts continued regionally and provincially to move toward a strategically strong innovation network. The 'Great' Recession of 2008-2009 added to the challenge, but the Alberta innovation network movement was determined. Alberta's Action Plan: Bringing Technology to Market in 2008 and Alberta's Research and Innovation Act in 2009 provided the mechanisms by which Alberta Innovates' RINs could be established in 2010.

Further, the Great Recession led the Canadian government to adopt economic-stimulus measures, one of which was funding for infrastructure through Western Economic Diversification of Canada (WD). With this funding, Economic Development Lethbridge, with the support of the City of Lethbridge, finally found the major financial means by which to realize their dream of a local entrepreneurial incubator and a regional innovation network. Economic Development Lethbridge partnered with WD, with support from the City of Lethbridge, to build Tecconnect, Lethbridge's technology commercialization centre, business incubator, and supporting data centre. The opening of Tecconnect enabled the first RINSA granting agreement with Alberta Innovates in 2011.

1990–2010: The Early Years

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
1995	Trending Ecosystem Event	Lethbridge Society for Excellence works to create a better community	Sixteen years prior to the first RINSA granting agreement, the Lethbridge Society for Excellence was a movement to find ways for Lethbridge to evolve into a better community with resources, connections, and services to encourage and support small business development and growth. Some members of this Society later became key players in RINSA.
2000	Ecosystem Strategic Shift	Alberta's Ingenuity Fund	The Ingenuity Fund was designed to support basic and applied research in Alberta. The fund was about $1 billion. This was intended to build strong links between education, research, and industry. It was believed at this time that for Alberta to be globally competitive, it needed highly skilled people, and the Ingenuity Fund supported the development and retention of highly qualified skilled persons.
2005	Trending Ecosystem Event	Early conversations about creating an innovation network in southern Alberta	Six years prior to the first RINSA granting agreement with Alberta Innovates, key future RINSA members talked openly about the need for an innovation network in southern Alberta to help entrepreneurs make connections and find resources.
2005	Trending Ecosystem Event	1st Community Futures' Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge	The Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge (CEC) is for anyone starting, or thinking of starting, a business. It is designed to create solid steppingstones through the turbulent start-up period of small businesses. The CEC offers participants free business training sessions, access to mentors for guidance and support, feedback on their business plans, and the opportunity to win money and prizes.
2006	Trending Ecosystem Event	Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership	Representatives from Economic Development Lethbridge, Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance, and SouthGrow Regional Initiative developed this partnership to attract investment, promote business opportunities in Southern Alberta, and explore international markets for trade and foreign investment through a "political friendship connection." Through existing expertise and established project capacity, this partnership focuses on fostering three streams of renewable energy development: solar, wind, and bioenergy
2008–2009	Major Ecosystem Event	'Great' Canadian Recession	In 2008–09, the Canadian economy entered a recession primarily because of problems in the housing market in the United States. These business failures in turn caused a lack of confidence in the overall global financial sector, and this had an impact on the economies of Canada and other countries around the world. The economic crisis led the Canadian government to adopt economic-stimulus measures. In January 2009, the federal government announced its $63 billion Canada's Economic Action Plan over two years, which provided strong and immediate support to the Canadian economy to encourage infrastructure investments, encourage economic growth, protect jobs, restore household and business confidence, provide business tax relief, and award grants to businesses and individuals.

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2008	Ecosystem Strategic Shift	Alberta's Action Plan: Bringing Technology to Market	Alberta's Action Plan: Bringing Technology to Market was part of Alberta's plan to build the Next Generation Economy. The Action Plan outlined key initiatives to assist in capturing the value of ideas, bringing technology to market faster, and keeping the benefits in Alberta.
2009	Ecosystem Strategic Shift	Alberta Research and Innovation Act	The Alberta Research and Innovation Act and Alberta Research and Innovation Regulation together establish the Alberta Innovates system and created the following entities to help oversee and manage the system: 1) the Alberta Research and Innovation Advisory Committee; and 2) Alberta Innovates. The purpose of the Act is to promote and provide for the strategic and effective use of funding and other resources to meet the research and innovation priorities of the Government.
2010	Ecosystem Strategic Shift	Alberta Innovates begins planning for the RINs	The Regional Innovation Network was designed to bring ideas to life. The network was founded in 2010 when Alberta Innovates began to formulate a plan for an integrated provincial support system that would assist and support the growth of innovative and technology-oriented businesses in Alberta. This provincial support system is known as the Alberta Innovation Network (AIN) System and is made up of a group of eight Regional Innovation Networks (RINs). A Regional Innovation Network (RIN) is defined as a group of like-minded organizations in a region that will collaborate to put their collective resources together to support and improve the development of innovations among small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs).
2010	Major Monetary Event	WD funding to build Tecconnect	Through Canada's Economic Action Plan, Western Economic Diversification of Canada invested $4.17 million to build Tecconnect, Lethbridge's technology commercialization centre, business incubator, and supporting data centre. The City of Lethbridge committed $1.1 million to support the infrastructure of Tecconnect, which was built adjacent to an office facility and large-scale data centre built by Iunctus Geomatics Corporation. Iunctus Geomatics, a private industry partner in geospatial technologies, facilitated the building of a Tier 3 data centre with $1 million over five years. **The opening of Tecconnect enabled the first RINSA granting agreement in 2011.**

RINSA 'HITS THE GROUND RUNNING': FUNDING FROM 2011–2016

Once Economic Development Lethbridge partnered with Western Economic Diversification of Canada to build their Tecconnect Incubator and Tier-3 data centre (co-located with Tecconnect), and the first Alberta Innovates granting agreement was signed to launch RINSA, RINSA quickly got to work. They worked to expand the network partnerships, build functional relationships with numerous community collaborators, and make local entrepreneurs aware of the services and supports available through RINSA. Further, representatives from the network attended numerous trending ecosystem events. RINSA also sponsored several team events with their partners to engage local entrepreneurs from diverse business sectors and academia, and to encourage potential community collaborating organizations to learn about RINSA to increase client referrals to RINSA partners and beyond the network.

2011–2016

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2011	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement between AI and Lethbridge College for RINSA	RINSA was established through a granting agreement with Alberta Innovates for $1.216 million effective from 2011–2014. The network adopted a client service model, whereby it assists start-ups and small businesses to successfully navigate the commercialization system through programs, services, and resources. The primary clients of RINSA are Southwest Alberta-based SMEs, more particularly technology or knowledge-based entrepreneurs. RINSA's base location is in Lethbridge. The creation of the Tecconnect centre initiated the RINSA Agreement with AI. RINSA aids start-ups and SMEs to help them navigate the commercialization system through programs, services, and resources. The main objectives of the network are to accelerate business growth, provide coaching and support network development, support education and learning, and facilitate access to non-dilutive capital. To achieve these objectives, RINSA offers a variety of services, including access to experienced business advisors, ecosystem navigators, one-on-one guidance, matchmaking and network connections, training and workshops, as well as meeting and workspace.
2011	**RINSA Team Event	**EDL's Tecconnect Incubator Opens – 1st Rural RIN incubator	The Tecconnect centre was established as a business incubator. It was intended to attract, incubate, and develop technology companies from ideation through to commercialization of products and services. The centre provides training, as well as support and networking opportunities in order to connect start-ups with customers, influencers and experts. Tecconnect is owned and operated by Economic Development Lethbridge, and is a key partner within RINSA. The centre has a direct link to innovation and business development services and provides a place to interact with like-minded individuals and organizations; a community where entrepreneurs can start and grow their business.
2011	**RINSA Team Event	**Built a Tier 3 Data Centre co-located with Tecconnect	The building of the Tecconnect Centre also included leveraging funding through Western Economic Diversification to build a Tier 3 Data Centre co-located with Tecconnect in partnership with Iunctus Geomatics Corporation, a local geospatial imaging company headquartered in Lethbridge.

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2011	****RINSA Team Event**	**RINSA officially launches	RINSA officially launched with the funding partnership between Alberta Innovates, the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge College, and Economic Development Lethbridge/Tecconnect. Early non-funded members were Community Futures Lethbridge Region, NRC-IRAP, SouthGrow Regional Initiative.
			Alberta Innovates is a provincial organization that supports the entire innovation spectrum – from the generation of new ideas through applied testing to commercialization or end-use. They provide funding programs, advice, connections, technical expertise, and applied research services to stimulate and grow research and innovation across Alberta.
			The University of Lethbridge is a publicly funded comprehensive academic and research university, founded in the liberal education tradition, located in Lethbridge, AB. The U of L is considered one of Canada's top-ranked universities and leading research institutions, attracting more than 8700 undergraduate and graduate students from around the world each year.
			Lethbridge College is a publicly funded community college with ongoing enrolment of over 4000 students. Located in Lethbridge, AB, Lethbridge College is a member of the Alberta Rural Development Network, creating models of rural community development through collaboration in research and learning.
			Economic Development Lethbridge is an independent, not-for-profit organization representing industries and sectors in the Lethbridge region. Its focus is to strengthen and develop the Lethbridge economy by initiating and facilitating proactive economic strategies and promoting Lethbridge as an excellent place to live, learn, invest, visit, and do business. Tecconnect is an EDL-owned and -operated centre for entrepreneurship and innovation. It is an innovation hub that offers training, support, and networking opportunities connecting start-ups with resources and business advisors.
			Community Futures Lethbridge Region is the Lethbridge branch of the Community Futures Network of Alberta, a non-profit business loan and business development organization, supporting small business development and rural economic diversification in Alberta.
			The National Research Council of Canada Industrial Research Assistance Program (NRC IRAP) provides advice, connections, and funding to help Canadian small and medium-sized businesses increase their innovation capacity and take ideas to market.
			SouthGrow Regional Initiative is an economic development alliance of 27 southern Alberta communities (representing over 170,000 people), committed to working together to further develop economic development goals for the region.
2011	Recognition	Alberta Venture magazine recognizes Lethbridge as one of the top 4 places in Western Canada for investment in the high-tech sector	Alberta Venture Magazine compared communities across western Canada on costs, taxes, regulations and bureaucracy, market access, labour pool, and special considerations that included economic indicators, economic diversity, and research institutes. Lethbridge was ranked as one of four 'Best Communities for IT/High-Tech in Western Canada' due to the new Technology Commercialization Centre and lower costs for office space and no municipal business or payroll taxes.
2012	RINSA Team Event	RINSA partners with the Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership	The Southern Alberta Alternative Energy Partnership began in 2006. It consists of three economic development organizations, who are all early supporters of RINSA, and all eventually become RINSA partners: SouthGrow Regional Initiative, Economic Development Lethbridge, and Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance. The relationship between RINSA and SAAEP became official in 2012.
2013	Trending Ecosystem Event	Accelerate SOUTH50 event – 1st time RINSA participated	Southern Alberta's only entrepreneur and tech event where founders, business leaders, start-up entrepreneurs, advisors, investors, mentors, and students converge to expand and support the entrepreneurial ecosystem thriving in Southern Alberta. A two-day event geared to help entrepreneurs, founders of start-ups, and seasoned businesspeople access capital; gain exposure to global markets; cultivate talent; and identify, connect and communicate with excerpts in the tech and non-tech industries. Sponsored by RINSA and others
2013-2019	Trending Ecosystem Event	Community Futures, ATB, and RINSA partner to host 9th annual Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge *(the event was hosted every year from 2005 until 2020, when it was put on hiatus due to global pandemic)*	In 2013, due to the partnership of RINSA with Community Futures and ATB, The Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge (CEC) increased the available prizes two-fold through the inclusion of a technology and innovation stream in addition to the regular grand prize. This was the first year that RINSA partnered on this ecosystem event.
			In 2015, for the 11th CEC, the prizes were increased beyond the general grand prize and a technology and innovation stream grand prize, to include a student award sponsored by the University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge College, and Medicine Hat College.
			In 2020, as with many public-gathering events, the 16th Annual Chinook Entrepreneur Challenge was put on hiatus until it is deemed safe for groups to gather for events.

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2014	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement Amendment between AI and Lethbridge College	The Granting Agreement for RINSA was amended to bridge them to the upcoming 2015-2016 Granting Agreement. This amendment was for $135,000.
2014	RINSA Team Event	RINSA partnered with Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce to help develop the "Next Generation Committee"	RINSA partnered with the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce to help develop a 'Next Generation Committee'. The aim was to network and support young entrepreneurs in the local business community.
2014	RINSA Team Event	RINSA participated in 'SouthWest Invest'	RINSA supported and participated in the Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance: "SouthWest Invest" Business and Investment Consortium. This economic development training session was presented by Economic Development Alberta in support of the Regional Economic Advice and Liaison (REAL) Team Network.
2014	RINSA Team Event	RINSA participated in 'CURE'	RINSA participated in the Community-University Research Exchange (CURE) event at the University of Lethbridge. RINSA provided a booth displaying AI programs and information as well as brochures for RINSA.
2014	RINSA Team Event	'Go to Market' Program co-hosted in Calgary and Lethbridge	Tecconnect, through RINSA, partnered with Innovate Calgary to offer the 'Go to Market' program to Tecconnect incubator companies, which was delivered by Rocket Builders from Vancouver.
2014	Trending Ecosystem Event	International Geoconference 2014: A Global Event in Old Quebec City	This conference was organized by the Canadian Institute of Geomatics in Quebec and the International Federation of Surveyors. In addition to providing state-of-the-art geospatial innovations and technology to a global group, they opened up the GeoCommunity to everyone by holding interactive activities for youth and the general public. Further, geospatial entrepreneurs from all different sectors showcased their products and services. RINSA members attended to recruit geospatial companies to Lethbridge and Tecconnect.
2014	Trending Ecosystem Event	Lethbridge embarks on Intelligent Community Path	EDL, backed by a number of Lethbridge's leading employers, proposed a high-tech partnership over four years to build a first-class small city where citizens and businesses can participate in a technology-dependent global economy. Tecconnect played a key part in the initiative through assisting in diversifying and strengthening the high-tech sector, increasingly adding more high-quality jobs into the market.
2014	Trending Ecosystem Event	GeoAlberta Event	RINSA co-sponsored the Lethbridge pavilion at the annual GeoAlberta in Calgary, October 27 and 28. This event was one of the largest geospatial conferences in Western Canada. It provided opportunities for GIS companies to network with industry experts suppliers and buyers. RINSA partners, EDL/Tecconnect were a major sponsor of this event and hosted three other geospatial companies to participate in the conference.
2014	Recognition	Alberta Venture magazine recognizes Lethbridge as the best community for incubating information technology	From a rankings standpoint Lethbridge was recognized by Alberta Venture as the 'Best community for Incubating IT'. The November 2014 publication credits Tecconnect, an Alberta centre for new commerce, as the "one-stop shop for up-and-coming entrepreneurs" and Iunctus Geomatics Corporation for playing a major role in the growing the geospatial industry in Lethbridge.
2014–2015	Major Ecosystem Event	Slight Canadian Recession	By the "two quarters of economic decline" definition, Canada had a brief, slight recession in late 2014 and early 2015, as the price of oil crashed.
2015	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement between AI and Lethbridge College for RINSA	This Granting Agreement for RINSA was to bridge over to AI's regular 3-year funding cycle for RINs beginning in 2016. This grant was for $292,000.

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2015	Trending Ecosystem Event	University of Lethbridge Launches the AGILITY program	A university-wide initiative that is designed to nurture and support innovation and entrepreneurship among U of L students at both the Lethbridge and Calgary campuses.
2015	Recognition	Lethbridge declared an Intelligent Community	In 2016, Lethbridge was also recognized by the Intelligent Community Forum as a Top 21 Intelligent Community of the Year. An Intelligent Community is one that makes sure it has the broadband and IT infrastructure needed to be competitive. Gaining a place among the year's Smart21 is considered a badge of honor as well as the first step to greater recognition as an Intelligent Community positioned to prosper in the broadband economy. This award recognized the work done in the community to ensure the residents have the opportunity to use technology in ways that will improve their lives. This includes Lethbridge increasing access to broadband connectivity, which encourages innovation, diversification, job creation, and networking so businesses can reach out on a global scale to partners, vendors, employees, and customers.

SETTING AN EXAMPLE: FUNDING 2016–2019

In this granting phase, RINSA continued to increase awareness of the network, engage with many stakeholders in their region and beyond, expand network partnerships and community collaborations, and increase their services and supports to entrepreneurs. On top of all that, they looked for ways to 'make their mark' as a regional innovation network. This involved, among other things, keeping up with changes in the Alberta entrepreneurial ecosystem, such as how the definition of 'innovation' was evolving from a STEM-centric focus to one that was more broadly inclusive of all types of innovations – resulting in increased demands for services by a more varied group of clients. Further, the Government of Canada implemented strategic and funding initiatives aimed at increasing the number of entrepreneurs from under-represented groups (e.g., women and newcomers).

RINSA responded to the federal, provincial, and regional movement for greater equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in entrepreneurship with several inclusivity activities. Of note, in 2017 RINSA representatives respectfully engaged with representatives from Blood Tribe Economic Development, one of the local Indigenous organizations. Engaging with the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem was a significant accomplishment, as RINSA was the first RIN to have representation from an Indigenous organization attend their regular network meetings. Building relationships and partnering with Blood Tribe Economic Development and Community Futures Treaty 7 led to the delivery of specialized entrepreneurial programs. Also, in 2018, Lethbridge held the first day-long Indigenous Summit for First Nations entrepreneurs looking to start or expand their business.

RINSA's commitment to providing services and supports to under-represented groups of entrepreneurs expanded beyond Indigenous entrepreneurs to include entrepreneurs living in rural and remote areas, post-secondary student entrepreneurs, and diverse groups of women entrepreneurs. RINSA became a leader and example among the RINs for EDI services and supports; providing information, lessons learned, and guidance to the other RINs.

2016–2019

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2016	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement between AI and Lethbridge College for RINSA	RINSA granting agreement and funding renewal aligned to AI's 3-year funding cycle for RINs. This Agreement was for $948,000.
2016	Strategic Shift	AI legacy corporations merged into a single corporation	The four legacy Alberta Innovates corporations – Bio Solutions, Energy and the Environment Solutions, Health Solutions, and Technology Futures – were merged into a single corporation, Alberta Innovates, with two wholly-owned subsidiaries – C-FER Technologies and InnoTech Alberta. In 2017, a new mandate was developed for the consolidated organization. Included in the new mandated was that AI would move towards an outcomes-oriented and market-driven approach, whereby tangible outcomes are pursued, and market and user needs are prioritized. The new mandate also highlighted the importance of collaborations and coordinated efforts that involved Alberta's various research and innovation stakeholders. AI's overall goal of developing an entrepreneurial ecosystem in Alberta remains constant.
2016	Trending Ecosystem Event	Southern Alberta economic development organizations welcome to their region a group of Chinese business owners and investors to develop trade relationships	A consortium of southern Alberta economic development organizations, representing more than 40 municipalities and hundreds of businesses hosted a group of Chinese business owners and investors to the region to develop trade relationships.
2016	RINSA Team Event	1st Tecconnect Challenge	Judges from EDL and some local entrepreneurs assessed the skills of Lethbridge College Multimedia Productions students during new Business Pitch Competitions. This provided students with low-risk scenarios to practice their professional skills, giving students a glimpse into entrepreneurship

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2016	Recognition	Canadian Business and PROFIT both rank Lethbridge 4th among Canada's best places for business	Lethbridge was ranked 4th out of 219 communities. The municipalities on this ranking show a clear commitment to business-friendly policies and economic development, which was good for local business owners, entrepreneurs, and residents.
2016	Recognition	Lethbridge recognized by Alberta Venture magazine as 2nd best community in Alberta for business	In 2016, Alberta Venture ranked Lethbridge second among the best communities in the province for business, stating: "In years of depressed oil prices, Lethbridge's diversified economy shines through the gloom."
2017	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement between AI and EDL for the Alberta Entrepreneurship Incubator (AEI) Program	AEI was a two-stream initiative funded for two years and was administered by Alberta Innovates. RINSA was awarded $400,000 from AI for this Program. The purpose of this Program was to offer support for individuals with innovative ideas, recent graduates seeking employment, and anyone who had the opportunity to create new products/concepts after service in a traditional industry sector, who were focused on becoming entrepreneurs.
2017	Trending Ecosystem Event	Ecosystem change in definition of 'innovation'	An increase in business ideas brought forth to the RINs shifted as the definition of innovation changed in communities, moving away from a previously STEM-centric focus on 'novel' or 'product' innovation to one that was more broadly inclusive of all types of innovation (e.g., business model innovation). Demand for services was 'diverse and dispersed.' Clients became more varied, looking for services more about business development than product development.
2017	RINSA Team Event	Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance becomes a non-funded partner in RINSA	**Alberta SouthWest Regional Alliance** is an economic development partnership of 16 rural communities representing a population of 35,000. With a Board of Directors comprised of elected officials from each community, Alberta SouthWest provides support for local businesses and attracting new enterprise in the region.
2017	**RINSA Team Event	**Blood Tribe Economic Development becomes a partner in RINSA	**Blood Tribe Economic Development** is a department of Kainai-Blood Tribe Administration, located in Stand Off, AB, and facilitates the development of private, public, and corporate enterprises and initiatives that build a self-sustaining economy for members of the Blood Tribe. Engaging with the Indigenous entrepreneurial ecosystem was a significant accomplishment, as RINSA was the first RIN to have representation from an Indigenous organization attend their regular meetings. Building relationships with and partnering with Blood Tribe Economic Development and Community Futures Treaty 7 led to the delivery of specialized entrepreneurial programs.
2017	RINSA Team Event	Launched Tecconnect+ED	EDL and RINSA launch Tecconnect+ED as part of the AEI Program – a new series of programs designed to help local entrepreneurs take their business from idea to market. Tecconnect+ED gives entrepreneurs access to professional business development advisors who can help move their ideas forward and connect them to the resources and information to grow their business during the critical startup phase.
2017	Trending Ecosystem Event	Lethbridge delegation to Asia	A delegation of 24 local business and community representatives from Lethbridge visited China and Japan to make connections in the areas of economic development and education. The delegation from Lethbridge included: City of Lethbridge, Lethbridge County, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge College, Lethbridge School District 51, Holy Spirit Catholic School Division No. 4, Economic Development Lethbridge, SouthGrow Regional Initiative, Transmark Ltd., Skiertech, Golden Ant Inc., Starfield Magrath Ltd. and Nikka Yuko Japanese Garden. Asian delegates expressed interest to visit Lethbridge and Chinese companies explored possible investment opportunities in southern Alberta.
2017	Major Ecosystem Event	Economic shifts and contraction of the energy sector in Alberta	The growing appetite for entrepreneurial pursuits at this time was considered a side effect of economic shifts and contraction of the energy sector. On one hand, an underutilized oil and gas workforce was looking to deploy its skills and find new professional opportunities. On the other hand, companies serving the oil and gas sector were looking to pivot to counter the negative impacts of the downturn. The shift toward innovation and entrepreneurship was partly driven by necessity.
2018–2022	Trending Ecosystem Event	Alberta Innovates' 1st Inventure$ conference & Inventure$ Unbound 2020–2021 (virtual event)	Inventure$ brings research, innovation, capital access, commercialization, experiential learning, and entrepreneurial communities together. The unique conference experience attracts venture capitalists, angel investors, early adopters, startups, business educators, service providers and more from Alberta and around the world. Due to health and safety concerns relevant to the global pandemic in 2020 & 2021, Alberta Innovates provided a completely virtual Inventure$ event.
2018	Strategic Shift	Government of Canada's 1st Women Entrepreneurship Strategy	Government of Canada implemented the first Women Entrepreneurship Strategy – a $2 billion investment aiming to double the number of women entrepreneurs by 2025. One of the strategy's key pillars was to enhance the data and knowledge of women's entrepreneurship throughout the country. This pillar supported the $9 million fund for the creation of nine regional WEKH hubs across Canada.

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2018	Strategic Shift	Government of Canada's Women Entrepreneurship Fund	The Government of Canada announced in their Budget 2018 funding to advance gender equality, women's economic empowerment, and support for women entrepreneurs through the $30 million Women Entrepreneurship Fund for over 300 projects, $2.5 million of which was for Indigenous women entrepreneurs.
2018	RINSA Team Event	The Food for Thought – Entrepreneurship, Leadership & the Economy breakfast	This event was sponsored by EDL and RINSA. At this event, EDL CEO Trevor Lewington and Social Entrepreneur and Restaurateur Mark Brand talked to local business leaders and entrepreneurs about support services, training opportunities, and the value of RINSA services to the development and advancement of entrepreneurs.
2018	RINSA Team Event	1st Indigenous Entrepreneur Summit in Lethbridge	Lethbridge held the first day-long Indigenous Summit for First Nations entrepreneurs looking to start or expand their business. Patterned after a highly successful event in Edmonton, the event was co-sponsored by Tecconnect, RINSA, and Business Link
2018	Trending Ecosystem Event	Lethbridge College launched its Agriculture Entrepreneur In Residence (AgENT) Program.	Lethbridge College launched its Agriculture Entrepreneur in Residence (AgENT) program, an extracurricular, non-credit program open to all Lethbridge College students from all disciplines of study. The program operates under the goal of inspiring agricultural innovation, one student entrepreneur at a time, providing experiential learning opportunities for students to develop foundational skills in innovation and entrepreneurship. There is a significant focus in this non-credit program on exploring emerging technologies as they relate to agriculture. AgENT is primarily funded through a private donation from prominent agriculture industry professional and philanthropist, Cor Van Raay, which was gifted in 2014 to both Lethbridge College and the University of Lethbridge. With the addition of funding support from Alberta Innovates to RINSA, the AgENT non-credit program expanded to provide on campus space, tools, and resources to support tech-focused student-run businesses as they launch and grow. The space continues to be accessible to alumni
2019	**Trending Ecosystem Event	**Southern Alberta Women in Business (SAWIB) formally becomes a non-profit organization	RINSA members were founders in forming and developing this fledgling organization. In January 2019, SAWIB formally became a non-profit organization with a membership of 50+ women attending monthly meetings in support of their businesses.
2019	Trending Ecosystem Event	Farming Smarter Conference	Tecconnect expanded its offerings in Blockchain and emerging technologies training and links through the engagement of subject-matter experts. Valuable partnerships emerged from local manufacturing and agri-food businesses that show great promise moving forward. Through partnerships and collaborations with the University of Lethbridge and RINSA, awareness of this technology continued to be raised.
2019	Strategic Shift	GOA's Alberta Fairness to Newcomers Action Plan	The Fairness for Newcomers Action Plan includes: • Enacting the Fair Registration Practices Act; • Expanding the International Qualifications Assessment Service currently provided by the Government of Alberta; • Expanding access to low-interest loans to immigrant professionals so they can start businesses; • Provide immigrants with career mentorship opportunities to support their full economic inclusion; • Supporting the work of immigrant settlement agencies to offer skills upgrading to under-employed foreign professionals; and • Building on collaboration with the federal government to offer pre-arrival orientation to foreign nationals selected for permanent residency in Alberta
2019	**Team Tech Development	**Tecconnect facility updates its AV/VC equipment to enable greater virtual access to programs/services for rural and remote entrepreneurs	Tecconnect upgraded its audio-visual system. The new system provided high-end delivery of programming and meetings through webinar and online conferencing. This development facilitated the delivery of workshops to rural and remote entrepreneurs who might otherwise not have been able to participate in the programming and services offered at the Tecconnect centre. **Note: This upgrade was done prior to the global pandemic and subsequent lockdown when all Tecconnect/RINSA services moved to virtual platforms. Thus, unbeknownst to RINSA and others, RINSA was ahead of the global trend of virtual meetings and learning.*
2019	**Team Tech Development	**Chinook Arch Regional Library System linked to Tecconnect through upgrade to AV/VC equipment	The Chinook Arch Regional Library System is a network of 33 southern Alberta rural communities including Kainai First Nation. With broadband access acquired through the provincial SuperNET initiative (that brought broadband to rural libraries, schools, and hospitals), Tecconnect's AV/VC equipment, workshops, training, and one-on-one mentoring could be accessed by rural and remote communities online or through the library system. It was then planned that local libraries be resourced with entrepreneur related materials and resources as well as peer mentoring meeting space. **Note: The libraries and RINSA's movement to virtual learning was done prior to the pandemic lockdown. Thus, unbeknownst to RINSA and the library system, they were ahead of the global trend for virtual learning.*

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2019	RINSA Team Event	AEI Funding: Resulted in 65 new events, 140+ new entrepreneurs.	Alberta Innovates' Entrepreneurship Incubator Program funding was provided to RINSA from 2017-2019. This funding allowed RINSA to increase its services to local entrepreneurs. Among other outcomes, RINSA held 65 new events and provided services to 140+ new entrepreneurs.
2019	RINSA Team Event	University of Lethbridge's Agility Program now partners with RINSA	RINSA expanded its partnership to include representation from the University of Lethbridge's Agility Program. This is a student-centered program with a focus on innovation with social, economic, and political impacts. A key part of this program is nurturing the entrepreneurial spirit within student and faculty. The Agility Applied Innovation program plays an important role in student entrepreneurial engagement at the University of Lethbridge. The Agility coordinator works with local start-up supports and RINSA to link students to events, competitions, and consulting. The students are also encouraged to seek feedback from a professor (supervisor) and other business consultants in town (ATB Entrepreneur Centre, Tecconnect, Business Link, other professors, etc.).
2019	**RINSA Team Event	**RINSA 1st RIN to have Rural Entrepreneur Virtual Portal	Tecconnect and Business Link believe that small business supports should be accessible to people across Southern Alberta. In partnership with Chinook Arch Regional Library System, the "Rural Entrepreneur Virtual Portal" was a pilot project that provided virtual business training and advisory services to residents of rural and remote areas of Southern Alberta. People who wished to expand their knowledge as they build their business could attend workshops in their own community Library, and one on one assistance is being provided through Business Link.
2019	RINSA Team Event	MultiMedia Challenge	The MultiMedia Challenge was offered through a partnership between the Lethbridge College Multimedia Production, Digital Communications and Media, and Tecconnect. Students were placed in collaborative groups to create marketing materials and a product distribution strategy for an entrepreneur from the Tecconnect Incubator. The entrepreneur met with the students, which culminated in a 5-hour intensive preparation and pitch presentation of their ideas. This gave the students a real-world experience as they attempted to meet the marketing needs of the client. Business Advisors were present to assist the group and judge the pitches.

'EXPANDING THE MARK': FUNDING 2019–2022

RINSA entered this next granting agreement with Alberta Innovates already ahead of the curve with their EDI-focussed service delivery, but they knew there was more to do. To enable expansion of their women entrepreneurship programing, they applied for and were the first RIN to receive funding from Western Economic Diversification of Canada for their Women Entrepreneurs in STEM program. Further, building on the relationship nurtured over the years, RINSA formally invited representatives of Piikani Resource Development Ltd to sit as a partner on the RINSA management team and Working Group. Along with representation from Blood Tribe Economic Development, this gave RINSA two representatives at the table to continue the flow and delivery of resources to ensure inclusivity of Indigenous entrepreneurs in southern Alberta. RINSA was also the first RIN to have an Indigenous Business Advisor. RINSA expanded their services and supports to under-represented groups through their programing for newcomer and immigrant entrepreneurs.

RINSA partnerships continued to grow during this time, now having 12 partner organizations and over 75 community collaborators actively involved with RINSA. As RINSA worked to increase their programing to a broader group of entrepreneurs, the world was significantly changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The subsequent global lockdown forced new thinking on how to do regular activities. In response to the limitations on in-person engagements during the pandemic, RINSA used their newly updated AV/VC equipment in Tecconnect to virtually host the 2-day Alberta Innovation Network meeting in 2020. Further, the upgrades to Tecconnect's AV/VC systems and RINSA's partnership with the Chinook Arch Library System enabled continued, active, virtual engagement with clients, local entrepreneurs, partners, and community collaborators. RINSA also launched their website (www.rinsa.ca) in 2020.

In 2021, 10 years after RINSA was officially launched, RINSA presented a business case to Alberta Innovates to conduct an impact case study to document the evolution of RINSA over the last 10 years, communicate its value and impact, and share lessons learned and actionable insights with other RINs, Alberta Innovates, and other ecosystem partners. RINSA was the first RIN to participate in an impact case study, which included a developmental network analysis and economic analysis. The link to the full RINSA Impact Case Study is here.

RINSA continues their evolution with the 2022–2025 granting agreement with Alberta Innovates, beginning April 2022.

2019–2022

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2019	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement between AI and EDL for RINSA	RINSA's continued operations with a renewed Granting Agreement between AI and EDL for $1.355 million for the period of 2019-2022.
2019	**Major Monetary Event	**Granting Agreement between Western Economic Diversification of Canada and EDL for WESTEM Program	To the benefit of RINSA, EDL was awarded $1.68 million to launch and manage the Women Entrepreneurs in STEM sectors in southern Alberta. It focuses on advancing gender equality in the STEM sector by supporting under-represented women in rural and remote regions. The Agreement runs from 2019-2022. With funding from the Government of Canada's Women Entrepreneurship Strategy, Economic Development Lethbridge and Tecconnect have created a program for Women Entrepreneurs in STEM offering training, networking, mentorship, and access to current and emerging technologies._x000D_ _x000D_ The Women Entrepreneurs-in-STEM (WESTEM) program focuses on advancing gender, rural-urban, and racial equality in entrepreneurialism. This is achieved by supporting under-represented women in rural and remote regions of southern Alberta and creating a female-based community of practice and a highly collaborative and streamlined network._x000D_ _x000D_ **Note: RINSA was the first RIN to be awarded WD funding for the EDI Women Entrepreneur in STEM funding. The other two organizations funded in Alberta were Alberta Women Entrepreneurs Association, located in Edmonton, which received over $1.1 million to launch a program training women entrepreneurs in digital business applications; and Community Futures Lloydminster and Region Development Corporation, located in Lloydminster, which received nearly $1.1 million to create and enhance incubator spaces in rural and remote areas.

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2019	Trending Ecosystem Event	RIN Principles developed and implemented by all Alberta RINs	The RIN Principles were developed in 2018 and officially completed and accepted in 2019. The RIN Principles are: • Technology and knowledge-based entrepreneur-centric • Pan-Albertan (AIN) • Community-based • Interconnected for sharing and learning • Adaptable • Collective Governance
2019	Trending Ecosystem Event	Alberta Student Entrepreneur Ecosystem launched	Thirteen of 26 post-secondary institutions in Alberta (including University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge College and others from the AIN) attended the inaugural meeting on how they can work together to build a student entrepreneurial ecosystem. Subsequently launching the Alberta Student Entrepreneur Ecosystem.
2019	**RINSA Team Event	**Piikani Resource Development Ltd becomes a partner on the RINSA team	**Piikani Resource Development Ltd.** is a wholly-owned corporation of the Piikani Nation, an aboriginal organization that represents Piikani Members. PRDL's purpose is to create economic development opportunities on the Piikani Nation. Building on the relationship nurtured over the years, RINSA formally invited representatives of Piikani Resource Development Ltd to sit as a partner on the RINSA management team and Working Group. Along with representation from Blood Tribe Economic Development, this gave RINSA two representatives at the table to continue the flow and delivery of resources to ensure inclusivity of Indigenous entrepreneurs in southern Alberta. RINSA was recognized as the 1st RIN (and only at this time) to have Indigenous organizations actively participating in their regular meetings.
2019	RINSA Team Event	Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce becomes a partner in RINSA	**The Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce** is the Voice of Business for Lethbridge and the region. With continued growing members of over 800 businesses, the Chamber pursues advocacy to take advantage of new opportunities for the region, while providing valuable services and resources to the members, and participating at both the provincial and national levels to advance the cause of business Canada-wide.
2019	RINSA Team Event	Town of Okotoks Economic Development Office becomes a partner in RINSA	**The Town of Okotoks Economic Development** works to enable a business climate that is conducive to business success through leadership, knowledge exchange, referrals, education, research, coaching and providing assistance on various levels for the Town of Okotoks.
2019	RINSA Team Event	CryptoChicks Blockchain International Competition	RINSA sponsored seven local technology students to participate in the CryptoChicks Hackathon International Competition in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. These competitors took their business savvy, computer coding, and blockchain knowledge to the international level. This event featured world leaders in blockchain technology and artificial intelligence, competing against people from all around the world.
2019	RINSA Team Event	RINSA partnerships with Technology Subject Matter Experts enable expansion of innovative training	For example: EDL/Tecconnect partnership with The WNDX Group Inc. to provide workshops in-person and via live webinar provincially regarding Coding & Programming. EDL/Tecconnect partnership with InBridge Inc. to provide workshops in-person and via live webinar provincially regarding Emerging Technologies, (Blockchain, AI, IoT, Machine Learning). Workshop deliveries by Tecconnect to Alberta Neuroscience audience to assist in supplementing business fundamentals for science students. Workshops presented by Cybera to provincial audience on the applications of Data Science, hosted by Tecconnect.
2019	RINSA Team Event	RINSA participated in AI's 2019 Inventure$ Conference	The University of Lethbridge Agility program participated in the planning committee for the 2019 Inventure$ student track; and 10 students attended the Inventure$ conference. Lethbridge College provided the set up and hosted the conference's VR sessions. The sessions were oversubscribed and very popular.
2019	**RINSA Team Event	** RINSA 1st RIN to have an Indigenous Business Advisor	Tecconnect partnered with Business Link to create an *Indigenous Business Advisor* role at Tecconnect. Both organizations covered half of this advisor's salary. The Indigenous Business Advisor provides business advice on a number of topics including general entrepreneurship and workshops on various topics, including finances, human resources, and funding. The role is meant to help create a connectivity with Indigenous stakeholders in the southwestern Alberta region
2019	RINSA Team Event	1st Futurpreneur Workshops sponsored by RINSA	RINSA created a partnership with Futurpreneur for mentorship, workshops, and funding to enhance the student incubator programs at University of Lethbridge and Lethbridge College, and the continued expansion of programming at Tecconnect for future entrepreneurs

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2019	**RINSA Team Event	**RINSA Launched 1st Women Entrepreneurs in STEM (WESTEM)	**Novel EDI programming – first RIN to successfully incorporate an EDI component for women entrepreneurs into their programming. Keeping in mind the intersectionality of EDI, it is worth mentioning that the WESTEM program delivered several projects that aimed at developing programming for rural, remote, Indigenous, ethnically diverse, and immigrant women entrepreneurs. For instance, WESTEM supported the development of a program specific to women Indigenous entrepreneurs with women organizers from Siksika, Blood, and Piikani Nations, and creation of a program dedicated to a cohort of women entrepreneurs who are new Canadians.
2019	**RINSA Team Event	**Immigrant/ Newcomer Entrepreneur Programs Launched	Local organizations were brought together to a roundtable to discuss the needs of Immigrant entrepreneurs in the region. Business Link led the discussion to get feedback and inform the attendees of the materials available to them through the Incubator and Business Link. Buoyed by the engagement, Lethbridge Family Services agreed to facilitate future meetings with these organizations and develop new learning opportunities for Immigrant entrepreneurs.
2019	RINSA Team Event	RINSA Bridge Program	The RINSA partners developed an innovative approach to tackle larger projects. The basic idea is to bring together the combined resources and expertise of the RINSA group to support larger scale or disruptive projects. Clients gain access to a wider range of business resources and an Idea Development Group.
2020	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement Amendment between AI and EDL	The Granting Agreement for RINSA was amended to increase the original budget of $1.355 million to $1.570 million
2020 ongoing	Major Ecosystem Event	Global Pandemic & Alberta Economy Crash	The COVID-19 global pandemic essentially locked down the world in March 2020, only having intermittent openings until March 2022. The pandemic affected, among other things, supply chains, innovation, research, development, production, consumer purchasing, capital investments, and public policy. Prior to the pandemic, Alberta's government was predicting a budget surplus and a booming economy. However, due to the combined effects of a provincial lockdown and an oil war instigated by Russia and Saudi Arabia, Alberta's economy has crashed. Fully 'opening-up' Alberta after the 2-year limited opening is contributing to Alberta's slow and steady economic recovery.
2020	RINSA Team Event	RINSA significantly increases its virtual service offerings to compensate for no in-person events	According to RINSA reports, over the almost two years of lockdown due to the pandemic, RINSA switched its efforts to providing a varied selection of virtual programs, events, and services to the community and clients.
2020	Trending Ecosystem Event	RINSA virtually hosts the 2-day Alberta Innovation Network meeting	Given the restrictions on in-person gatherings during the global pandemic, RINSA used their newly updated AV/VC equipment to host the 2-day Alberta Innovation Network meeting; thus, virtually bringing together people from all the RINs to collectively work on strengthening and building the Alberta Innovation Network (AIN).
2020	RINSA Team Event	RINSA provides extra resources to support the local and regional business community in response to the global pandemic	The COVID-19 health crisis affected the economy in Alberta and significantly slowed down business activity, making it particularly difficult for SMEs. In this context, the RINs (including RINSA) proved to be useful in pooling information and resources to help SMEs with their immediate needs. In 2020, RINSA and its members developed various resources to support the local and regional business community. EDL supported the Lethbridge & Region Economic Recovery Task Force, a locally coordinated task force that looked at better aligning resources to get southern Alberta's economy back on track. Tecconnect experienced an increase in activity and service delivery, which was facilitated by virtual and video conferencing technologies. RINSA business advisors were also provided with additional mental health training and supports to help entrepreneurs struggling with the impact on their business due to COVID-19 pandemic.
2020	RINSA Team Event	RINSA website Launched	As part of RINSA's rebrand and marketing, they officially launched a website – www.rinsa.ca RINSA also created a new logo to appear on their marketing materials.
2021	Major Monetary Event	Granting Agreement Amendment between AI and EDL	The Granting Agreement for RINSA was amended to increase the 2020 revised budget of $1.570 million by an additional $325,000. Total value of Agreement now $1.895 million

YEAR	CATEGORY	EVENT	SUMMARY
2021	Trending Ecosystem Event	University of Lethbridge appoints new Director of Indigenous Education and Communities	The University of Lethbridge's focus is on helping remove barriers for students, as well as helping recent graduates succeed after completing their degrees. This new Director is supporting RINSA members, particularly to explore partnerships and ways to get Indigenous students more involved in the community and to deal with Indigenous relations/politics
2021	RINSA Team Event	RINSA sponsors 2021 Business of the Year Awards	RINSA joined on as a sponsor for the 2021 Business of the Year Awards hosted by the Lethbridge Chamber of Commerce. The category that was sponsored was entitled Best Innovative Idea During COVID-19. The award was presented to a business that was successfully able to adapt to new challenges during the Covid-19 pandemic with a unique and innovative strategy. This business demonstrated resilience and an ability to adjust to ever changing challenges.
2021	RINSA Team Event	Indigenous Youth Entrepreneurship Program	RINSA partnered with Blood Tribe Economic Development to engage with their Youth Entrepreneurship Program. During the session, supports, services, and exclusive offerings that Indigenous entrepreneurs could find through RINSA programs and other EDL/Tecconnect based pathways were outlined.
2021	RINSA Team Event	Who's Who in RINSA	Informal lunch and learns with the community to get to know the RINSA members: what they do as it aligns with important ecosystem announcements.
2021–2024	Trending Ecosystem Event	Alberta Innovates launches it Scale-Up and Growth Accelerator Program	The Government of Canada made a $5 million investment under the Regional Innovation Ecosystem (RIE) program to increase access to supports and resources for Alberta-based SMEs. The federal investment enables Alberta Innovates to expand funds available to not-for-profit business accelerators participating in its Scale-Up and Growth Accelerator Program. Funding will further bolster Alberta Innovates' efforts to attract and encourage local and global business accelerators to Alberta. Business accelerators play a critical role in enabling companies to scale and grow at a faster rate through supports such as training and mentorship, access to investors and networks, and logistical and technical resources. Approximately 300 Alberta technology firms across a range of economic sectors are expected to benefit from the initiative over the next 3 years. Western Economic Diversification of Canada funding will compliment an investment of up to $25 million from Alberta Innovates, bringing the total funding for the initiative to up to $30 million.
2021–2022	**RINSA Impact Case Study	**Alberta Innovates partners with RINSA to conduct an Impact Case Study on the last 10 years	A RINSA representative approached Alberta Innovates with a business case to conduct an impact case study to document the evolution of RINSA over the last 10 years, communicate its value and impact, and share lessons learned and actionable insights with other RINs, Alberta Innovates, and other ecosystem partners. RINSA was the first RIN to participate in an impact case study, which included a developmental network analysis and economic analysis. Link to full report here.
2022	Strategic Shift	GOA's Alberta Advantage Immigration Strategy	The Alberta Advantage Immigration Strategy guides the creation of new immigration streams under the Alberta Advantage Immigration Program; supports the implementation of a Fairness for Newcomers Action Plan; and outlines actions under main areas of Alberta's immigration system. The new immigration streams include: • The Foreign Graduate Entrepreneur Stream makes Alberta more attractive to newcomer entrepreneurs, and in turn, sparks economic growth and job creation. • The Rural Renewal Stream creates opportunities to secure business succession and job creation in rural communities and maintain or expand services in rural Alberta. • The Graduate Entrepreneur Stream supports the Government of Alberta's efforts to bring new talent, diversify and grow Alberta's economy. • The Rural Entrepreneur Stream results in the creation and continuation of businesses and services in small communities.
2022	Major Ecosystem Event	Russia's war against Ukraine	In addition to significant loss of life, and damage to Ukraine's infrastructure and cultural heritage, the war instigated by Russia against the Ukraine further strains global supply chains and the economic recovery and diversification in many industries and countries. Typical mechanisms of economic growth and diversification, such as research, development, innovation, and growth in entrepreneurship, still struggle to recover from the pressures experienced during the global pandemic; being further challenged by this war. However, the war had an unintended outcome of increasing demand for Alberta's oil; thus, energy prices surged, boosting cash flows and activity in the oil and gas section. There is the expectation that further expansion of Alberta's export pipeline capacity will accommodate growing oil production and exports in the coming years.
2022	**RINSA Team Event	**1st Indigenous Technology Incubator Program launched	The Indigenous Technology Incubator Program is meant to bring additional learning and supports to Indigenous entrepreneurs who have a business idea or current business that is looking to explore entrepreneurial fundamentals while learning how to better use and consider technology and innovation in their operation. This program is supported by WESTEM and RINSA.

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ALBERTA INNOVATES

About Alberta Innovates

ALBERTA INNOVATES IS THE PROVINCE'S LARGEST AND CANADA'S FIRST PROVINCIAL RESEARCH AND INNOVATION AGENCY. For a century we have worked closely with researchers, companies and entrepreneurs – trailblazers who built industries and strengthened communities. Today we are pivoting to the next frontier of opportunity in Alberta and worldwide by driving emerging technologies across sectors. We are a provincial corporation delivering seed funding, business advice, applied research and technical services, and avenues for partnership and collaboration.

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