



**Athabasca  
University**

**THE FUTURE IS NOW**

**Report of the Presidential Task Force on Sustainability**



## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	3
Context .....	4
Options for the Future of Athabasca University .....	9
OPTION ONE: A refocusing of Athabasca University to align more fully with Campus Alberta's priority to serve Albertans first, including a potential leadership role in eCampus Alberta.....	11
OPTION TWO: Under the framework of Campus Alberta principles (accessibility, sustainability and excellence), focus on efficiency and effectiveness in course delivery and business practices.....	13
OPTION THREE: Federation with Another Campus Alberta Institution.....	15
OPTION FOUR: Affiliations with Other Institutions and Organizations in Campus Alberta and Beyond .....	17
Conclusion .....	19
Appendices .....	25
Appendix A: Submissions to the Presidential Task Force on Sustainability .....	25
Appendix B: The Open University and Open Universities Australia .....	44



## **Introduction**

At a Special Meeting of the Athabasca University Board of Governors on 26 February 2015 a task force was struck to review and consider options for the future sustainability of the university. Subject to approval by the Board of Governors, the task force was directed to report on options to the Government of Alberta and the university community no later than 1 June 2015.

The Board approved the membership of the task force as follows: interim president Peter MacKinnon (chair); two public members of the Board of Governors (Diane Davies and Marg Mrazek); one dean (Dr. Veronica Thompson); one full-time academic faculty member of General Faculties Council appointed by the interim president (Dr. Jane Arscott); the Director of Strategic Initiatives at Athabasca University (David Head); one student jointly chosen by the presidents of the Students' Union and the Graduate Students' Association (Jason Nixon) and one member appointed by Alberta Innovation and Advanced Education (Gilbert Perras). Mr. Nixon withdrew from the task force upon his election as a Member of the Legislative Assembly on May 5, 2015.

The interim president appointed Dr. Margaret Kierylo, Director of Academic Planning and Priorities, to serve as Secretary to the Task Force. We are grateful to Dr. Kierylo for her excellent advice and support in the course of our work.

The task force solicited submissions from members of the AU community and provided email and social media opportunities for them to participate in our work. We



received a total of 136 submissions, all of which may be germane to the conversations that lie ahead. For this reason we have summarized the submissions and attached them as an appendix to this report (Appendix A). We are gratified by the number and quality of submissions, and we thank all who contributed to them and sent them our way.

## **Context**

Dictionary meanings of sustainability suggest that a sustainable university is one that can confidently be developed and maintained over time at a level commensurate with its mission, commitments and environment. By this definition, the sustainability of Athabasca University is in question: based on our most reliable assumptions, we project the likelihood of insolvency in 2016/2017.

At the outset we must acknowledge a risk that annual surpluses in our 2013/14 and 2014/15 budgets may lead to complacency or, worse, denial about our assumptions and projections. It is important to remember that these surpluses reflect incremental measures on a year to year basis that are not available to address the more structural, underlying challenges to our sustainability. Position vacancies, workforce depletion and other austerity measures, may produce a surplus in an annual operating budget, but they are not contributors to financial stability over a period of years. Indeed they may stretch the institution too thin and thereby undermine its sustainability. Readers of this report may wish to review the data in the Comprehensive Institutional Plan 2015-2018 to obtain a fuller picture of our institution's finances.



Our present condition and circumstances did not coalesce overnight. Over many years we have experienced changes in enrolment demographics, operating funding, tuition policy, the status of information technology in funding decisions, and competitive influences, that cumulatively challenge our capacity to operate at the level required locally and beyond. These are joined by issues arising from the decision in 1984 to move Athabasca University to the town that bears the same name. And finally, we must acknowledge that our university has employment conditions and practices that further compromise our sustainability.

There has been a marked increase in our reliance on tuition over the past thirty years. From supporting about 80 percent of the operating budget 30 years ago, the government grant supports about 30 percent of our operating expenses today. This is largely attributable to a shift in enrolment demographics two decades ago that saw AU increase out of province student numbers for which there was no commensurate increase in its grant. (At present 38 % of our undergraduate students and 28% of our graduate students are from Alberta). Though Alberta's post-secondary funding is more the result of history and incrementalism than it is formulaic, this combination of enrolment demographics and funding practice has contributed to our present situation. AU is unique among Campus Alberta public institutions in the extent of the decline in its provincial operating support expressed as a percentage of operating expenses. Because there are only two major sources of revenue available to us - government grant and tuition - this decline has diminished our capacity, and made us particularly vulnerable to enrolment declines



and fluctuations.

This shift has been accompanied by caps on tuition increases that contain our ability to rely on tuition to compensate for the change in our operating budget profile. Because of our enrolment demographics, these caps apply only to a minority of our students, but they are nonetheless a significant constraint, though not the only one. We are subject to market discipline in the tuition we charge to all our students, and are thus prevented from fully compensating through it for the lower percentage of our operating costs borne by the provincial grant.

The state of our information technology is a serious sustainability issue. In recent years we have received some infrastructure maintenance funding for our IT (\$1.79 million for 2015/16 of which \$1 million is specifically for IT) but information technology is to Athabasca University what buildings are to traditional universities. It is our capital, and it is mission critical capital at that: we are more dependent upon IT than are traditional universities. Because it is not treated as capital in our funding arrangements, AU has not been able to make the investments in information technology (\$39 million over the next five years) that are required, and we are falling further behind in developing the kinds of systems we need to do our work well. Moreover, we risk systems failure that could put us out of business.

Growing competition also is challenging AU's sustainability. Though its mission as an open university remains unique in Alberta and distinctive beyond, its use of online learning is not. Other Campus Alberta and out-of-province institutions are delivering



courses and programs online and this can be expected both to continue and grow. We must now compete with institutions whose capacity and resources are greater than ours. In addition, there is the eCampus Alberta consortium that has witnessed recent enrolment growth in contrast to the difficulties experienced by AU in sustaining current enrolments. While our university is a member of eCampus Alberta, there are financial and other constraints that prevent us from offering courses as part of the consortium.

We must acknowledge, too, the impact on Athabasca University of the 1984 decision to move the university to the town of Athabasca. Although the town is attractive and hospitable, its size (population 3,000) is an obstacle to the recruitment and retention of professional personnel (only ten of AU's more than 550 faculty and tutors live in Athabasca). And the small local recruitment base makes it difficult to match skills to the nearly 400 administrative, professional and support jobs at its Athabasca location. It is true that there are viable small town universities and colleges elsewhere in Canada and the United States, but in those the faculty, staff and students are assembled together in one community that over time acquires the features and amenities of a university town. Our four physical sites and the wide dispersal of our faculty, staff and students make this more difficult - if not impossible - for our university.

Finally, the sustainability of Athabasca University has been compromised by terms and conditions of employment negotiated over time. While agreements between AU/CUPE, AU/ AUPE, and AU/AUFA are all complicit in this respect, the most serious threats to our continuing viability are found in the last of these. First, the bargaining is split between



separate tables - salaries and benefits, terms and conditions - which prevents the employer from negotiating the whole agreement to arrive at balanced settlement terms that deal at once with monetary, language and operational issues. Resolution of monetary issues is restricted to final offer arbitration and there is no impasse language to address resolution of language and operational issues. Second, the terms themselves are onerous and costly. Access by non-academic personnel to research and study leaves reserved only to academic staff in most institutions, is one among an array of leave provisions potentially equivalent to one day per week absence from work (not including vacation time or statutory holidays) for each included employee. Severance terms and benefits, in particular the routinization of merit pay (virtually everyone receives it), are among the richest in Alberta's post-secondary environment.

In making these observations we are not seeking to attribute blame. It takes two to reach agreement, and the administration bears particular responsibility to ensure collective bargaining is compatible with the university's mission and circumstances. That over time administration has fallen short on this count does not alter the fact that some of our terms and conditions of employment are impediments to our sustainability.

In summary, these are the circumstances challenging the sustainability of Athabasca University in the spring of 2015. We set them out to ensure wide understanding that our challenges are real and substantial, and that overcoming them will require focus, cooperation and support from within and outside our university. At the same time, we cannot help but observe that there is irony in the fact that the Alberta university which





most fully incorporates the growing importance of online learning faces immediate questions of sustainability.

Our university was created with remarkable vision, and our abiding conviction as members of the task force is that the strength of our university lies in its mission. Ours is an open university. We make post-secondary education available to people who could not otherwise access it or would have more than average difficulty in doing so. We play a unique and vital role in Campus Alberta, and we are deeply committed to students and the student experience. Our mission shall be our motivation and guide as we consider and outline the options we are charged to develop.

### **Options for the Future of Athabasca University**

It should be clear from the context described above that the status quo is not an option. Without major remediation, our university faces the prospect of insolvency within two years. Nor will budget incrementalism be sufficient. It has been practiced for some years and we are close to exhausting its possibilities, if we have not already done so. And the projected budget shortfall is too large to be addressed by incrementalism.

It should be equally clear that discontinuance is not an option. Athabasca University occupies a unique and important place in Campus Alberta. There are barriers to participation in post-secondary education and we are committed to breaking down barriers, and to offering an online student experience that is second to none. One only has to attend our unique Convocation ceremonies to hear the moving personal stories of our



graduates. Theirs are not accounts of 17 and 18 year olds making a natural transition from high school to university. They are stories of older, more mature citizens who may not have qualified for university study when they were younger. They are stories of working men and women who are unable to leave their employment to pursue university degrees. They are stories of people in remote or rural communities who cannot afford to relocate to the site of a traditional university. They are stories of people (e.g. Indigenous peoples) who are underrepresented among university populations. And they are stories of people (e.g. with physical and other challenges) who face more than the usual hardships in attending traditional institutions. Athabasca's commitment to breaking down barriers, and our experience in assisting people to do so, are important components of a strategy to improve access by Albertans and other Canadians to university education.

With both status quo and discontinuance ruled out, we can turn our attention to realistic possibilities. We believe they are four in number: (1) a refocusing of the university to align more fully with Campus Alberta's priority to serve Albertans first, including a potential leadership role in eCampus Alberta; (2) an emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness in course delivery and business practices; (3) federation with another Campus Alberta institution; and (4) affiliations with other institutions and organizations in Campus Alberta and beyond. These options are not stated in any order of priority, and they are not mutually exclusive. For example, we see the themes and actions under option two as necessary regardless of other options in play, and it may be that possibilities drawn from other options will underlie future direction and sustainability.



These options must also be assessed against the conditions and circumstances, enumerated above, that have undermined our sustainability. And they must be tested against assessment criteria of which there are four kinds: strategic (e.g. fit with mission); financial (operating and capital costs); compatibility with stakeholder expectations, and efficacy of implementation (time and likelihood of success).

**OPTION ONE: A refocusing of Athabasca University to align more fully with Campus Alberta's priority to serve Albertans first, including a potential leadership role in eCampus Alberta.**

Although we have noted above that post-secondary funding in Alberta is not formulaic, it must be conceded that AU has not benefitted, under existing policy and practice, from an enrolment demographic that features large numbers of out of province students. A question that naturally arises is whether our case for public support would be advanced by greater alignment with a Campus Alberta emphasis on serving Albertans first. One option might be for us to serve only, or primarily, students physically resident in Alberta. In the Information Age we may not wish to accord significance on this scale to the difference between physical and virtual presence. However, if that difference is explicitly or implicitly embedded in funding policy, we must ensure that AU is not disadvantaged as a result. What would be the consequences of serving only students for which we would be funded by the Province of Alberta?

The obvious first consequence would be an abrupt and sharp reduction in our student numbers. It is not possible to say by how many because we cannot predict that a



reduction would equal the numbers of our out of province students. Our in province numbers might decline as well because we could not maintain current levels of programs and services if our enrolments did not support them. Albertans who might have come to Athabasca in the past might in the future choose elsewhere, or forego university education entirely.

A reduction in our student numbers would mean fewer faculty, tutors, professional and support staff, with negative consequences for students and the student experience, for employees, and for their families and communities.

An exclusively in province recruitment focus would also hurt our reputation. We are respected and appreciated across Canada for the access of students in other provinces and territories to our programs. And anyone who travels abroad in the open university world soon discovers that Athabasca University is widely admired internationally for its pioneering contributions to online learning and the audiences it reaches. We would be a diminished and more parochial institution in their opinion, with negative impacts on our capacity to recruit faculty and other professional experts, and on our ability to build partnerships and attract support from beyond our province.

Of course, exclusive in province enrolment represents an extreme variant of this option, and we can contemplate other less drastic ways to implement it. However, there are enabling conditions that are not dependent solely on AU's initiative. This option would require a commitment from the Ministry to recognize AU as THE province's open and online university, and new funding arrangements would be necessary to enable our



university to fully and properly discharge this mandate. In particular, information technology would have to be recognized as our capital so that we could develop our digital capacity and fully embed new technologies and pedagogies across our operations.

Pursuit of this option would require a disciplined and expeditious conversation about the future of eCampus Alberta, and a clear, explicit mandate for AU as its leader. It would also require parallel implementation of option two in order to provide quality assurance, and additional public investment to improve internet connectivity in northern Alberta.

**OPTION TWO: Under the framework of Campus Alberta principles (accessibility, sustainability and excellence), focus on efficiency and effectiveness in course delivery and business practices.**

This is not so much one of four options as it is a summary of possible measures that are prerequisites to, or steps in, stabilizing and modernizing our university to better meet our present mission.

Many of the submissions to our task force addressed aspects of this subject and we know they will be helpful in the work to come. Several respondents emphasized cost effectiveness and marketing, and supported an education review to consider each teaching program from the standpoint of costs (including faculty, tutors, support and administration); enrolment; pedagogy and currency of courses; course development processes in use, including cost per new course and/or course renewal; and competition, including growth potential. The task force believes that an education review along these



lines, together with an audit of our business and administrative practices, will lead to improvements in the student experience and in our sustainability.

In general, efficiency and effectiveness were among the most prominent themes in submissions to the task force. And, we should observe, important initiatives in this respect are already in place or in process. We have implemented the ICT Investment Governance Framework to provide consistent, transparent and equitable processes for the prioritization and funding of ICT-related projects. We have implemented new finance and human resources reporting systems. We are developing a new responsibility-centered budget model and we are seeking a more ambitious timetable for its realization.

Submissions received by the task force demonstrate that more can be done. The themes of course inventories and review, and business practice audits, were recurring proposals as were calls for improvements in course delivery and delivery models. Some proposals called for IT outsourcing; others emphasized the possibility of fee generating online services and expertise to other institutions. Still others directed attention to a range of human resources issues, and to the impact of our distributed locations and workforce on communication and productivity.

It is clear that the measures suggested under this option do not address all impediments to our sustainability. It is also clear that some of them are essential to our future viability. They will take time, and time is limited. We could begin by distinguishing between initiatives that can be implemented immediately or in the short term, and those



that will take longer. The responsibility-centered budget model is among the former and is already in progress; it should be fully implemented with dispatch. The education review or inventory mentioned above, and the audit of business practices, should be commenced as soon as possible though we can anticipate a longer time before they yield results.

### **OPTION THREE: Federation with Another Campus Alberta Institution**

Federated means joined in federal union. With universities as with countries, terms of federation may vary, and participating public institutions may negotiate between themselves and with their sponsor (government) to achieve terms of federation that are in their common interest.

One option is for Athabasca University to enter into a federation with another Alberta post-secondary institution. The idea behind federation is that each of the federated partners sees advantage in the relationship. They can do together what they cannot do separately, and they can do it better. There are many examples of federation across the country (examples include Victoria University and the University of Toronto; First Nations University of Canada and the University of Regina; St. Jerome's University and the University of Waterloo; St. Thomas More College and the University of Saskatchewan).

A federation between AU and another Alberta institution would not be acceptable if its effect were simply to transfer Athabasca's sustainability burdens to its federated partner. Terms and conditions of federation addressing these burdens and other matters would be negotiated between the two institutions and with the Government of Alberta, and



transitional funding would be required to forge the new relationship. New or amended legislation might be necessary for it to have the force of law. The task force cannot presume to determine in advance all of the issues that would be on the negotiating table; that would be for the next stage of the process if federation is judged worthy of further exploration. But we wish to record an important advantage of this approach from our point of view, and we believe, for Campus Alberta: Athabasca University would remain a distinct institution, with its mission clear and intact, within the new relationship.

It is our experience that the name of Athabasca University is respected in Canada and admired abroad. A global pioneer in its early years, AU remains among today's leaders in flexible, open, online learning, and innovative student service. It is a jewel in the crown of Campus Alberta and is an essential element of our province's goal to improve access to post-secondary learning for all Albertans. Renewal of this role in federation with another institution could offer Campus Alberta, and the new federation, an opportunity to build world leading capacity across a broad spectrum of post-secondary learning opportunities. For this potential to be realized, the Government of Alberta, Campus Alberta and eCampus Alberta should accord priority to the new federation for any future initiatives in open and online learning.

There are several potential Campus Alberta partners. In the above examples, the federated institutions are located on the same campus and, while this is not essential, geographical proximity is desirable if there is to be the dynamic relationship that makes federation a serious option. The nearest major centre is Edmonton, and AU already has a





substantial presence in two Edmonton locations, a consideration that makes that city an obvious possibility in exploring this option. And through a 2014 memorandum of agreement, we are collaborators with other northern Alberta institutions to address challenges facing those living in northern and remote regions. This, too, points to the advantages of exploring federation in Edmonton as the more northerly of the province's major cities.

#### **OPTION FOUR: Affiliations with Other Institutions and Organizations in Campus Alberta and Beyond**

Federation is not the only relationship in which to work in partnership with other post-secondary institutions. Where possible, collaboration and cooperation should be and are expected from Campus Alberta institutions. We are party to some affiliations now and we are open to others. These arrangements take many forms, with the focus generally being on achievement of academic or shared service goals that are believed by each participant to be of mutual benefit. But the test of their merits in the context of this report is the extent to which they contribute to our sustainability and it is against that test that they must be assessed.

Exploring opportunities to advance post-secondary education through collaboration with other institutions in and beyond Alberta should always be among our goals. Federation or affiliation with another Campus Alberta institution is neither a precondition for other affiliations nor a barrier to them. Whatever the disposition of options contained in this report, Athabasca University has and will continue to have important connections to



other institutions and organizations at provincial, national and international levels.

Campus Alberta and eCampus Alberta are expressions of role and context in our province.

Our MOU with other northern Alberta institutions reflects our opportunities and obligations in the north. Canadian Virtual University is an Association of Canadian universities specializing in online and distance education. Our bilateral relations and partnerships reflect opportunities - some strategic, some opportunistic - to work with other institutions in common cause whether in open education, research or other initiatives.

What is lacking in both a provincial and national context is a substantive and strategic framework that advances Alberta's and Canada's place in online learning and Athabasca University's place within it. Whether attributable to competition among institutions, provincial boundaries, or other influences, our place in the online world is fragmented and largely underdeveloped. In contrast we might point to a comparison of Canadian developments with the evolution of Open Universities Australia, and the Open University in the UK (See Appendix B). These represent serious, coordinated, and national initiatives to secure leadership places in the world of open, online learning. A comparable initiative in Canada could see Athabasca University as a centrepiece (more than fifty percent of our students are from out of province), with partners rather than competitors in other provinces. It could attract important affiliations with organizations such as Google, Mozilla, and Microsoft which could support IT infrastructure together with innovative applications and development of IT solutions.



A vital question is whether an ambitious, coordinated and collaborative Canadian program can be anticipated to present our country's face to the world in online learning. We have eCampus Alberta and soon, eCampus Ontario. We see comparable initiatives in other provinces and developing interest in Universities Canada (formerly AUCC) to lend more national context and presence to these and other activities. But we cannot yet anticipate a national strategy or a whole that is larger than its uncoordinated parts. We can lend the voice of Athabasca University to an appeal for them, but as yet they are incomplete and long term prospects only.

## **Conclusion**

The task force offers this analysis and these options as a basis for a disciplined, evidence based consideration of our future. We conclude our report by emphasizing, two prerequisites, three interrelated themes, and by outlining next steps.

The first prerequisite is that we must be open to change - not begrudgingly and hesitantly - but with confidence that in addition to challenges, this era offers unprecedented opportunities for AU to lead in the development of world class, Albertan and Canadian capacity in the open, online world. Our mission and experience have prepared us for this leadership. Our aspirations and determination can make it possible, to the great advantage of our province and country.

Our second prerequisite is investment. We are on a path to insolvency and altering that path will require funding. All of our options will require transitional financial support



en route to a stable funding model commensurate with goals shared by AU, the Government of Alberta and other partners. This is a sine qua non if we are to avoid insolvency in 2016/17.

The first of our three themes is this: the future is now. We do not have the luxury of unlimited time in which to reflect upon our current circumstances. Nor is it productive to debate the reasons and responsibilities for the conditions that have brought us to our present state. Our goal is a forward looking one: the identification of pathways to a sustainable future. We suggest that the options and measures proposed must be tested against the conditions that have precipitated our unsustainability and on the assessment criteria outlined above. This means that for each option, these questions must be asked: will this option lead to improvement in our operating budget? Will this option facilitate a business model in which sustainable revenues are sufficient to meet our reasonable operational needs now and in the future? Will it substantiate our claim that, for Athabasca University, information technology is capital and should be treated as such for funding purposes? Will this option address the recruitment, retention and matching skills to jobs issues that arise from having our head office in Athabasca? Will it resolve the unsustainable terms and conditions of employment embedded in our collective agreements? Will this option improve the capacity of AU to compete on behalf of Campus Alberta in providing an excellent student experience in the online, open university world that is of growing importance in the national and global post-secondary landscape?

Further, we must ask of every option and proposed action: does it fit with our



mission as an open, online university? Are the resulting operating and capital costs compatible with stakeholder expectations, particularly those of the Government of Alberta? And, can the option be successfully realized in time to avoid conditions that would immediately precipitate insolvency?

Our second theme is that Alberta needs Athabasca University. Accessibility, sustainability and excellence are the pillars of Campus Alberta, and in a province in which 58% of Albertans in the workforce hold post-secondary credentials (sixth highest level among the provinces), we can make a claim to accessibility that is unique among Campus Alberta institutions. Our Office of Institutional Studies Surveys show that 77% of AU students report they face barriers preventing them from pursuing their educational goals at campus-based universities.

On the subject of excellence, AU is committed to continuous improvement. For example, despite our budget constraints, we are adopting new learning technologies that enhance open learning environments and the student experience, and we continue to utilize course and program reviews to improve undergraduate and graduate courses and programs. While our sustainability is an issue at this time, we can help our province by persevering in our present mission and growing our potential to offer post-secondary opportunities to those who might otherwise be obliged to forego them. Quite simply, by itself, AU has the potential to improve upon that 58% number.

There is another reason why Alberta needs AU. Technology is critically important to the delivery of higher education, and without further investment Alberta will fall behind.



Today's learners come from an online world and if we want to engage them, we need to offer higher education in ways that resonate with them. The need is clear as eCampus Alberta statistics reflect that the demand for convenient, open, flexible and high quality online learning is growing in the province. That is what AU does and strives to do better. Our objective is to take advantage of all of the changes in technology that have occurred in recent years so that we can be the leader in the development of online learning. Our objective is to be the best. We have no other option.

Our third concluding and related theme is that a review of the 2014 Campus Alberta Planning Resource emphasizes the close alignment between AU's capacity, potential and values, and present and future needs of our province. The three priority system level outcomes are a learner enabling system, value for investment and advancing knowledge. Enabling learners is what our university is all about, and the high returns to the province from its investment in AU's unique capacity to enable learners in our province are demonstrable. Advancing knowledge through research, for a university of our size and composition, is best achieved through identification of existing and potential research strengths and focusing on them, and this we have done and are doing. These priority outcomes combine with social demographics (an anticipated population growth rate of 21.8% by 2023; growing numbers of Indigenous citizens, particularly in Edmonton and northern Alberta; and predicted labour shortages in key sectors of the economy) that all point to the importance of post-secondary education in general, and to the unique and substantial contribution - existing and potential - of Athabasca University.



In closing we return to the idea that the future is now. In 2014 Athabasca University hosted the Future of Alberta Digital Learning Forum. The purpose of the forum was to address the question: what does Alberta have to do to be a leader in digital learning by 2030? A draft report on the Forum has been prepared by Dr. George Siemens and we can anticipate the final report soon. A harbinger of its conclusions can be found in the draft Executive Summary:

Education systems globally face complex challenges to respond to emerging socio-technical and economic environments. As globalization continues to drive an integrated and connected economy, the ability for regions such as Alberta to remain competitive will be critical concerns. How a region educates all members of society becomes foundational to economic competitiveness and prosperity. Imagining learning in 2030, and beginning to prepare for this future through policy and resources allocation, requires attention to infrastructure, technology, new teaching models, quality education, and governance.

And, we might add, Alberta's success in being a leader in digital learning by 2030 will depend in large part on whether we build on the opportunities presented by the evolution of Athabasca University. To do this we must first ensure its sustainability.

Our work is only beginning. With the approval of the Board of Governors, we envisage reporting to AIAE, as requested, by June 1, and simultaneously to AU communities. We expect the university administration to proceed immediately with measures that can be taken now, particularly the audit of business practices suggested under option two. An education review or inventory will follow soon, led by the faculties and with advice from General Faculties Council. The timing of conversations with the Government of Alberta will depend on the advice of the deputy-minister of AIAE as to when the new government and minister are prepared for whatever discussions are deemed necessary. Conversations with



third parties, if any, will follow. It is important that we not lose a sense of urgency. We have time, but no time to lose.

Respectfully submitted,

Jane Arscott

Dr. Jane Arscott, Associate Professor, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences

Diane Davies

Diane Davies, The Board of Governors of Athabasca University

David Head

David Head, Director, Strategic Initiatives, Athabasca University

Peter MacKinnon

Peter MacKinnon, Interim President, Athabasca University

Margaret Mrazek

Marg Mrazek, Vice-Chair of The Board of Governors of Athabasca University

Gilbert Perras

Gilbert Perras, Executive Director, Advanced Learning and Community Partnerships,  
Alberta Innovation and Advanced Education

V. Thompson

Dr. Veronica Thompson, Dean, Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences





## **APPENDIX A**

### **Submissions to the Presidential Task Force on Sustainability**

Respondent #1 recommended an abandonment of the faculty structure, greater efficiency and streamlining of administrative units, and a rethinking of learning resource fees.

Respondent #2 pointed to salaries as a major sustainability issue and recommended an assessment of staffing levels to determine where efficiencies can be realized. The location of the central campus in Athabasca was also questioned. The writer also reflected upon the tuition cap and pondered whether its removal would increase operational revenues at AU.

Respondent #3 called for support of Information Technology (IT) systems that assist students in learning. The respondent also advised that new positions should focus on supporting initiatives that reduce cost, and/or make systems and business practices more efficient. The respondent also noted that communication and morale at AU needs to be improved.

Respondent #4 suggested alternative IT storage solutions and proposed other IT infrastructure possibilities. The respondent also expressed concerns about outsourcing IT solutions and the email system renewal initiative.

Respondent #5 called for process improvements that would lead to operational efficiency. The respondent noted that the location of the main campus in Athabasca inhibits recruitment and retention. The writer also questioned AU's faculty-focused operational model and emphasized that AU's collective agreements are the university's greatest challenge as routine salary increases outpace revenue.

Respondent #6 called for the implementation of a responsibility centered budgeting model and a more transparent budgeting process. The respondent also recommended a review of academic programs and increased and streamlined student support systems.

Respondent #7 suggested a new business model wherein revenues and expenses would be attached to faculty members. The respondent also called for the outsourcing of IT.

Respondent #8 emphasized that the university should focus on a short term and long term sustainability model. This could be achieved by focusing on "20% of the activities that cause 80% of our issues." The writer called for the streamlining of internal (financially impacting) processes and provided an overview of possible actions related to immediate growth opportunities (i.e. marketing, partnerships, providing professional services, development of niche programs). Finally, the respondent noted that AU should seek out alternative funding opportunities (public, private, and innovation funding).



Respondent #9 recommended a comprehensive academic program audit. The writer emphasized that it is essential to “[a]nalyze revenues and costs on a program-by-program basis.”

Respondent #10 argued that the university should undertake a course and program review. Technology platforms and software should also be rationalized and technologies such as virtualization should be leveraged. The university’s webpages should be standardized for consistency and marketing purposes.

Respondent #11 asked for clarification around how the task force was defining “sustainability.” The writer reflected upon the existence of eCampus Alberta and questioned whether Athabasca University could fulfill the quality assurance standards established by the consortium. The respondent emphasized that the university should be pursuing and implementing “state of the art online pedagogical systems and processes” in order to increase enrollment.

Respondent #12 noted that competition in online learning is increasing. The submission called for a commitment to improve student services, including streamlining processes around registration, exams, and extensions.

Respondent #13 focused on the need to improve the student experience. The writer emphasized the need to: enhance tutor-student interactions, customize Moodle, and improve course design by shifting from “content-based learning to experience/competency/activity-based learning.” The respondent also called for focused international student recruitment.

Respondent #14 provided a perspective on the reasons why Athabasca University faces sustainability challenges. The writer argued that a distributed workforce results in decreased productivity and low employee engagement. Centralizing the workforce in Athabasca could move the university forward. The respondent also noted that the university often begins projects it cannot finish due to a lack of commitment and infrastructure support.

Respondent #15 recommended a course audit and more reflection on what contributes to a successful course. The respondent also questioned AU’s delivery model noting that “the self-paced online model is not an effective way of learning for everyone.” Finally, the writer argued for increased marketing efforts to attract AU’s target market.

Respondent #16 noted that AU’s competitive advantage at the undergraduate level is its continuous enrollment, self-paced model. The university’s competitive advantage could be enhanced by adopting alternative assessment schemes and Open Educational Resources (OERs). Adopting these measures could result in more dynamic and publicly accessible courses.



Respondent #17 argued that salaries are AU's greatest sustainability challenge. The writer called for a simplification of Performance Assessment ratings, a reduction in merit increment costs, and an end of "the 'cumulative' and 'on-going' cost structure of additional 'bonuses'."

Respondent #18 questioned the existence of a library at AU.

Respondent #19 proposed a pay cut for those who receive high salaries (i.e. academics, professionals, senior managers, the Executive).

Respondent #20 argued that a "more nimble and rapid course development process" is essential for the university to remain competitive. The writer also called for the adoption of Open Educational Resources, balance in the implementation of the Student Success Centre model, and improved communication and collaboration within the institution to foster innovation.

Respondent #21 proposed that all tutors adopt Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) phones as a cost-saving measure.

Respondent #22 recommended a course and program audit. The "inventory" should include an assessment of learning resources and pedagogical activities "to measure and track the technological and pedagogical innovation in each area." The writer reflected upon the university's undergraduate programs and argued that the individual study model is outdated. The submission also called for: internationalization; a reduction in the number of faculty; a more focused research mandate; consolidation of the campus location; and system-wide integration of library services in Alberta.

Respondent #23 recommended restructuring the way in which student fee payments are processed as a cost-saving measure. The respondent noted that additional revenue could be generated by increasing all undergraduate tuition fees by an amount equal to the out-of-province fee. The writer also pointed to salaries as a major sustainability challenge.

Respondent #24 raised the possibility of federal funding for Athabasca University given that the university's mission is national (and international) in scope.

Respondent #25 proposed several cost-savings measures related to Information Technology. The writer suggested consolidating the university's email systems, standardizing IT computing equipment, and amalgamating IT departments.

Respondent #26 recommended executive salary cuts.

Respondent #27 argued that Athabasca University should remain in the town of Athabasca. The writer noted that the university should focus on increasing student enrolment. This



could be achieved by: decreasing tuition, diversifying course offerings, and increasing marketing.

Respondent # 28 argued that Athabasca University could continue to grow by recommitting itself to flexibility in programming, by seeking collaborations and partnerships, and by internationalizing. The writer emphasized that it is essential for the university to be open to “change, reorganize, and integrate unique and future orientated ways of learning through technology.”

Respondent # 29 observed that it is essential for the university to redefine itself and what it offers. The focus of the Task Force on Sustainability should be on strategic realignment rather than on internal changes.

Respondent #30 pondered about the costs and benefits of pursuing accreditation by the Middle States Commissions on Higher Education (MSCHE) and other accreditation processes.

Respondent #31 advised that any cost savings or revenue generation measures should be assessed carefully to ensure long term sustainability. For the university to remain viable, the writer emphasized that it essential for the university “to focus on changes which will cause revenues to grow faster than costs.” The respondent also called for increased marketing efforts targeted at current students.

Respondent #32 argued against the use of Moodle in course delivery as the learning platform inhibits the formation of meaningful relationships between tutors and students.

Respondent #33 focused on the need to enhance the student experience and learning systems. The respondent recommended streamlining current business processes and called for significant investment in Information Technology Services. The writer also provided an overview of the Student Support Centre model and its impact on student learning, registration, course extensions, learning resources, and exams. An audit of courses was also recommended.

Respondent #34 recommended the streamlining of businesses processes and a reconsideration of how student fees are collected. Common business practices across the entire institution, the writer noted, “would allow for greater interdepartmental sharing of skills and knowledge.”

Respondent #35 addressed the financial status of AU Press. The writer suggested the Press develop a business plan to demonstrate its ability to become a cost-recovery entity. The respondent also noted that the Press has produced excellent OERs.

Respondent #36. This submission focused on academic programs and academic delivery. The respondent called for the exploration of more flexible academic course delivery



opportunities, a more cost-effective and timely course development process, and the adoption and enforcement of procedures to enhance efficiencies related to course delivery. The writer also mentioned partnerships and collaborations, faculty workloads, and outlined the administrative and pedagogical benefits of the Student Success Centre model.

Respondent #37. This submission criticized the task force for not having a tutor among its members, questioned its openness, and expressed resentment at what seemed to the writer to be blame levelled at all AU employees for the university's financial problems. The writer criticized the Student Success Centre, 'administrative bloat', poor technological change, and current marketing techniques. Course updates, reexamination of our decentralized campuses, and the elimination of redundant processes were also mentioned in this submission.

Respondent #38 emphasized that AU's sustainability challenges stem from a revenue problem. The respondent called for departmental restructuring related to reporting, expansion of certificate programs, and more investment in the course production process. The writer also cautioned against the cutting of programs as the wide breadth of courses and programs at the university attracts visiting students.

Respondent #39 emphasized that university operations should be centralized in the town of Athabasca. The writer also pointed to salaries as a major sustainability challenge and recommended the implementation of a more rigorous performance assessment system.

Respondent #40. This submission focused on the need for the university to be innovative in addressing its sustainability challenges. In response to this suggestion, the respondent provided a proposal for a unique program in personal and career development.

Respondent #41 argued against the relocation of Athabasca University to an urban centre as the university's "rural setting is part of that unique mandate and vision for our institution." The writer called for an examination of administrative inefficiencies and noted that a clear definition of 'sustainability' was necessary for the university to effectively address its challenges.

Respondent #42 emphasized that the university must develop, support and sustain collaboration and social interaction in the workplace. The writer stated that the establishment of "an effective networked environment" could result in the deployment of "collective intelligence" which would enhance the working environment and generate new ideas. The respondent also noted that innovation at the university is hampered due to the existing governance structure which is hierarchical, rigid and complex. The submission called for flexibility and simplification of processes and more rich engagement with staff so that "the creative energy of the community can be unleashed."

Respondent #43 recommended the reestablishment of the academic computing unit to advance innovation in course delivery and research. The respondent also addressed





workplace morale and recruitment and retention. In this context, the writer recommended: the centralization of AU's satellite locations to St. Albert, more face-to-face events, international recruitment of academics to Athabasca, a spousal employment program, and the adoption of collaborative communication and file sharing software designed for improving the administration of distributed workplaces. The respondent also argued against the selling of the AU house and advised that the university explore local procurement at AU Central to strengthen AU-regional sustainability.

Respondent #44 addressed the issue of recruitment and retention of university personnel to the town of Athabasca. The submission, which consisted of a compilation of contributors, called for university to reassert and recommit itself to the town and its people.

Respondent #45 recommended a focused and aggressive marketing campaign to attract international students and recent newcomers to Canada. The writer also recommended the discontinuance of several management positions as a cost-cutting measure and noted that more frequent meetings at AU Central would raise morale and "generate ideas and discussion."

Respondent #46 rejected the notion that sustainability can be achieved by relocating the main campus to an urban centre.

Respondent #47 critiqued the first seven submissions received by the task force as they focused on restructuring which, the author argued, is often ineffectual, diverts attention from enhancing "educational approaches and programs," and has a negative effect on morale. In response, the writer provided a list of 24 recommendations to address sustainability. The recommendations examined various themes and topics including: employee engagement; employee workloads; course development; course production costs; course materials; research funding opportunities; consolidation of senior level positions; project management; AU's new expense claims system; Adobe Connect; video production capacity; employee collaboration; international visiting scholar initiatives, and the AU committee structure, among others. The respondent concluded by recommending the creation of an Initiative Development Department that would "identify key opportunities, [be] able to respond quickly to these opportunities, and [be] able [to] capture these opportunities before our competitors do or before potential partners move on to someone else." This submission was supported by 10 faculty members.

Respondent #48 recognized the need for the university to cut costs but emphasized that long term sustainability can only be achieved if the university expands its market reach. The writer provided short term and long term recommendations for the university to achieve sustainability. In the short term, the respondent recommended: contracting out server farms, a course and program audit, converting AU house to a scientific field station, consolidating the AU campus in the greater Edmonton area, repurposing the AU library, and amalgamating several director-level positions. In the long term, the respondent recommended refocusing the university to provide more technical education opportunities,



expanding health, business, and science program offerings domestically and internationally, and establishing a centre for excellence in leadership. The writer also raised the possibility of affiliation with another Alberta post-secondary institution.

Respondent #49 expressed skepticism about the responsibility centred budgeting model. Budgeting, the writer suggested, should recognize that faculties are “university partners in a single larger and common enterprise.” The respondent also emphasized the importance of sustaining a broad set of program offerings across the university.

Respondent #50 recommended consolidating the university’s presence in Edmonton by relocating to St. Albert or the greater Edmonton area and extending the telework policy to save costs. The writer also questioned the hiring practices of the IT department.

Respondent #51 observed significant duplication in course offerings across Campus Alberta and eCampus Alberta. The writer recommended the consolidation of online offerings into “one online school” that would have “the infrastructure to deliver quality courses to all Alberta PSIs.”

Respondent #52 recommended increasing student fees and selling AU house to generate revenue. The writer also questioned AU’s past rebranding efforts and the recent reclassifications of several positions.

Respondent #53 emphasized that “the University needs to change.” The substance of this submission focused on employment practices. The writer noted that AU’s collective agreements “limit the ability of the University to adapt the terms and conditions of employment so as to become more efficient or effective.”

Respondent #54 recommended the adoption of Open Educational Resources (OERs). OERs, the writer argued, have the potential to increase efficiency in the course production process and will help the university address its “costly relationships with textbook publishers.”

Respondent #55 suggested a renewal of AU’s mission. The strategic focus, the writer argued, should be “on quality open and distance education.” The respondent also addressed AU’s IT systems and recommended outsourcing systems such as email and hosting systems with the University of Alberta or University of Calgary to reduce risk exposure for AU.

Respondent #56 recommended that the university cease sending graduate course materials by priority post. The submission also noted that AU should consider increasing tuition fees to compensate for the rising costs of course materials.

Respondent #57 provided the task force with thirty-four recommendations related to teaching, research and service. Prominent themes and topics examined included: student services; staff morale; the university’s mission; course offerings; course completion



deadlines; course delivery; the university's course numbering system; course production; tuition fees; teaching load; the administration of exams; the role of academic coordinators; union associations; the university's research capacity; graduate programs; financial resources; policies and procedures; technology gaps; and community outreach. This submission also addressed location and research and study leave provisions.

Respondent #58 observed that many projects at the university are pursued, but are rarely completed. In response, the respondent called for more financial responsibility. The writer also questioned AU's rebranding efforts and addressed the increasing workloads of frontline staff.

Respondent #59 emphasized that "AU's mission is to open access to education to students who cannot access traditional university learning." In this context, the writer examined several digitization initiatives at the university. The respondent argued against the digitization of programs and curriculum, as moving to the digital sphere can hinder many social groups, most notably Indigenous communities, prison inmates, and remote workers, from pursuing their educational goals. The writer concluded by recommending that all courses, course materials and exams be made available in print and paper format to ensure that AU fulfills its social justice mission.

Respondent #60 emphasized that "AU has built up a reputation for student service, educational innovation, and scholarly excellence." The writer offered four suggestions to improve the university: renumber courses to facilitate credit transfer from visiting students; implement a more flexible course development process to facilitate "fresher course offerings"; advertise the university through professors and advisors at universities across Alberta and beyond; and enhance the university's research portfolio by establishing a post-doctoral program or visiting professor program. The respondent also observed that AU should enhance its visibility by participating in large national conferences.

Respondent #61 rejected the notion that location hinders recruitment of staff to Athabasca. The writer also called for the implementation of the student support centre model and proposed more fiscally responsible management of the university's finances.

Respondent #62 provided a brief overview of provincial funding levels for AU arguing that historically the government has been an "unreliable partner." The writer also addressed the effects of tuition fee policies on the university and observed that the existence of eCampus Alberta facilitates and supports a duplication of online university level offerings. The respondent argued that the lack of support for AU could be addressed by a) taking "stock of its political assets," b) educating the Ministry on the university's contributions and successes, and c) educating AU management on the university's funding history. The writer concluded that if substantial public investments are not forthcoming, AU should consider "pursuing an alternate sustaining investor."





Respondent #63 recommended the university focus on flexibility, openness and removing barriers. These goals could be supported by implementing rolling start dates and end dates. The writer also observed that collaboration between institutions should be encouraged, but emphasized that AU should be “Alberta’s only Online Option.” The respondent concluded by suggesting an online exam system and more collaboration between faculties.

Respondent #64 called for several university-wide reviews including a review of all programs and courses and departmental reviews to “evaluate productivity and efficiency factors.” The writer also addressed the need to improve student services. This could be achieved by enhancing communication, expanding service hours, and creating a mentoring program. Lastly, the respondent suggested AU personnel relinquish their merit pay to fund sustainability initiatives.

Respondent #65 observed that AU should emphasize its uniqueness among Alberta’s post-secondary institutions. The respondent advised that several options should be considered to strengthen the university. First, AU should become “the prominent distance delivery hub for other institutions, both provincially and nationally.” Second, the delivery of student services and administration should be streamlined to ensure that AU has “a comprehensive learner support model.” Third, “entrepreneurial incentives” should be encouraged. Lastly, the writer emphasized that the university must focus on long term sustainability. In this context, the respondent addressed various topics including: quality, risk management, land development, innovative programs, research opportunities, and collaborative projects.

Respondent #66 emphasized AU’s contribution to Campus Alberta: the university provides rigorous and accessible education. The writer recommended that the provincial government be periodically reminded of AU’s mission.

Respondent #67 called for a “more flexible education model.” To achieve this, the respondent called for a more streamlined course production process, more flexibility and mobility between educational institutions, and the adoption of a modular approach to instructional offerings. The writer also suggested the university embrace OERs and open textbooks. Lastly, the writer advocated for “more user friendly approaches to supporting students.” For example, using technologies learners use in their daily lives could result in “improved student retention and satisfaction.”

Respondent #68 suggested the university put a stronger focus on graduate programs and recommit to research to generate more revenue from external funding agencies. The writer also recommended decentralizing marketing efforts and internationalizing. The respondent also questioned the sustainability of providing students with learning resources and observed that “entrepreneurial ideas for revenue generation” are often not implemented. The respondent recommended that faculties be given more autonomy to pursue, develop, and lead initiatives related to alternative revenue sources.



Respondent #69. This submission focused on student retention. The writer emphasized that student concerns should be addressed in an open manner with students engaged in the process. The respondent also called for the adoption of a student email system.

Respondent #70 observed that it is difficult to comment on the sustainability of AU without full knowledge “about all of the various departments and how they operate within the university.” Sustainability should be thought about beyond finances and budget as “[u]niversities are a place of intellect, research, knowledge, and thought.” The writer emphasized that decisions about sustainability should consider the importance and value of AU’s strong academic reputation and external partnerships and relationships.

Respondent #71 argued that sustainability can be addressed by program and course expansion. In this context, the writer recommended diverting resources to faculties in need, streamlining administrative units, and cutting several senior-level positions. The writer also recommended that faculties be given budget autonomy and called for an administrative audit to assess efficiency.

Respondent #72 questioned the policies and procedures related to salaries. Specifically, the writer addressed the routinization of merit increases noting that such policies are unsustainable.

Respondent #73 questioned the notion that the university is facing financial unsustainability. In this context, the writer critiqued recent hiring decisions in two departments. The respondent also addressed morale, workloads, ‘administrative bloat’, and location.

Respondent #74 expressed support for a course review or audit. The respondent also reflected upon the lack of funding for AU's IT infrastructure. This submission also called for a review of the future of AU Press and a reconsideration of the tutor model.

Respondent #75 encouraged the university to organize more events and activities at AU Central, specifically at the Academic Research Centre building. Such activities would enhance and build the university’s culture.

Respondent #76 recommended the university explore a partnership with Lynda.com, an online, subscription-based education site.

Respondent #77 provided an overview of AU’s sustainability challenges. The writer addressed: the governance of AU, the government grant structure, and pension liabilities. To address these challenges the respondent made several recommendations. First, the writer recommended more collegial and collaborative governance. Second, the respondent advised that the university work with federal and provincial governments and possibly private partners to create an initiative to support online learning. Lastly, the writer recommended that the government contribute additional funds to existing pension plans as



the university carries the majority of the cost.

Respondent #78 emphasized that salaries are the university's greatest sustainability challenge. The writer recommended implementing a system wherein all salaries reflect the university's growth. The respondent also called for a program and course audit. This submission also addressed the Student Success Centre model and telework policies for professionals.

Respondent #79 recommended the university pursue the global market. The writer provided an overview of potential partnerships, among them the Canadian Red Cross and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. If internationalization is not feasible, the respondent recommended the university amend its mission and focus on the local market.

Respondent #80 reflected upon AU's Staff Tuition Allowance Policy. The policy, the writer argued, should be reconsidered as a cost-savings measure.

Respondent #81 critiqued the marking techniques adopted by one faculty. This submission also criticized some of the recommendations brought forward in the summarized submissions and denounced the task force for discussing collective bargaining issues. The writer concluded by recommending that members of the task force "analyze the outcomes of various models of [academic] delivery as well as their costs."

Respondent #82 observed that morale at the university is very low and criticized the past leadership team for not focusing on the university's mission and students. Attached to this submission were the reflections of AU's tutors on the Student Success Centre model. This submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #83 criticized the implementation of the "call centre model" noting that "AU's financial stability cannot be ensured by alienating its students and the workers who deal with them." The writer criticized the task force for not having a tutor among its members and questioned its openness. The submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #84 emphasized the contributions of tutors and academic experts to AU and criticized the task force for not having a tutor among its members. The writer emphasized that tutors see opportunities for cost savings within the tutor model. The submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #85 stated that AU's long term sustainability requires a shared culture of "revenue and expense management." The submission called for targeted marketing in urban centres across Canada and the United States and the implementation of an enrollment funnel model to ensure that learners progress through the "student life cycle."



The submission also examined various topics including: alternate payment systems for students, the tutor model, student satisfaction, MOOC's, high enrollment courses, and non-program students. The writer concluded by calling on the university to create a rubric to critically assess initiatives and emerging opportunities.

Respondent #86 argued that the best sustainability plan is one that considers quality education, actively consults with staff, and takes a long term view of increasing enrollment. Included in this submission were the reflections of AU's tutors on the Student Success Centre model.

Respondent #87 proposed that AU explore a partnership with the National Coaching Certification Program.

Respondent #88 emphasized that student services need to be improved. Of particular concern to the writer were issues related to exams, transcripts, and course materials. The respondent also proposed that the university explore the possibility of sharing IT services and expertise with other post-secondary institutions in Alberta as a cost-savings measure.

Respondent #89 observed that Alberta has among the lowest post-secondary participation rates in the country and is not faced with the national issue of a demographic reduction in the number of potential students. The writer recommended that consideration should be given to establishing a consolidated platform where AU leads in the delivery of online courses and programs. The respondent also addressed location noting that operations should be centralized in the town of Athabasca. The writer concluded by recommending that AU moves to adopting Open Educational Resources.

Respondent #90. This submission focused on the quality of courses at AU. The writer observed that courses should not focus on content, but on "concepts, theories, and skills that reside in the course materials." To ensure that the university produces excellent courses, the writer recommended that a quality assurance team be established to review all courses. The team should consist of students, tutors, academics, and course designers.

Respondent #91 expressed commitment to seeing the university succeed over the long term. Included in this submission were the reflections of AU's tutors on the Student Success Centre model. This submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #92 observed that efficiency could be attained "with leadership that embraces and enhances collegial governance, transparency, and good communication." Past practices, the writer noted, have resulted in apathy, distrust, and a resistance to change. The respondent proposed a framework for invigorating staff at AU. The proposed framework focused on "creating accountability regimes that allow the university to achieve its goals in a transparent, democratic manner that is driven by evidence-based decision-making."



Respondent #93 expressed commitment to seeing the university succeed over the long term and noted that the “permanence of employment and provision of benefits encourages commitment and gives opportunity for attracting good academics.” The writer criticized the administration for pursuing the implementation of the Student Success Centre model noting that cost savings of the model have not been demonstrated. In addition, the respondent strongly criticized senior administrators for not consulting tutors and academic experts on issues related to academic delivery. This submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #94 observed that long-term sustainability requires agility, responsiveness, vision, innovation, and flexibility. The respondent argued that in the short term the university should focus on providing “exemplary student services and superior programs.” The writer also provided examples of existing communication gaps with students that require immediate attention. To address these gaps, the respondent recommended the adoption of an AU student email system to ensure consistency in communication. In the long term, the university should explore building a mobile application for student communication and support.

Respondent #95 recommended that the university begin tracking student interest in programs not currently offered at AU. Currently, the writer observed, students are expressing marked interest in honours degrees.

Respondent #96 proposed that the university consider offering credit to students who complete massive open online courses (MOOCs) at other institutions. Such interinstitutional networking could further AU’s mission, offer a greater diversity of open and online courses that are relevant to AU’s academic programs, and enhance AU’s credit transfer system.

Respondent #97 observed that AU is an “[i]nternational business” and argued that local politics should not influence the university’s operations.

Respondent #98 observed that competition in online learning is fierce: many institutions and organizations have more resources, better technology, greater exposure and offer personalization at a lower cost. AU has great potential to lead in online learning as the university has “the best distance education researchers in the world” and “well-evolved structures ... to support the administration and delivery of online education.” The writer recommended that the university: improves communication (with staff and students), embraces agility, reduces the rigidity of structure and process, and invests in customizable IT solutions.

Respondent #99 proposed several cost savings and revenue generation initiatives. The writer questioned the continuance of AU Press, called for AU house to be sold, and noted that travel costs should be reconsidered for Executive Group and Budget meetings. The





writer called for a course and program audit and more accountability around personal development leave usage.

Respondent #100 suggested that the Academic Research Centre be used to hold plenary meetings and conferences. Such initiatives could “improve the university on main campus.”

Respondent #101 emphasized that universities exist for the public good and should not be viewed as “profit making businesses.” The respondent argued that AU is losing its competitive advantage by implementing the Student Success model. The submission explored various topics including: IT systems; the faculty structure; salaries; workplace culture; the role of tutors; academic contact; and academic delivery. The writer concluded by calling on the task force to halt the implementation of the Student Support Centre Model. The submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #102. This submission focused on the need to explore administrative efficiencies. The writer suggested that efficiencies could be addressed by: encouraging common policies and practices across programs and faculties, ensuring that staff used current software programs, and adopting automated programs, forms, and tracking systems. The respondent also addressed academic programs arguing that redundant courses across programs should be consolidated. This submission also explored: IT infrastructure; graduate services; faculty workloads; student satisfaction; professional development; marketing; and internationalization.

Respondent #103 observed that competition in online learning is growing rapidly. The respondent proposed that AU adopt Open Educational Resources (OERs) as they can facilitate the changes and innovation needed at the university. This submission provided an overview of the benefits of OERs and included resources on how to implement OERs. This submission also proposed outsourcing various functions including IT and financial services and called on the university to reconsider the need for a physical library. The respondent also called for: an administrative and course audit, salary cuts for administrative staff, expansion of AU’s satellite locations, and consolidation of Graduate Studies with the Research Centre. The respondent also questioned the routinized nature of salary increases and promotion procedures.

Respondent #104. This group submission called for the implementation of responsibility-centred budgeting and the streamlining of Finance and Human Resources systems and processes. The submission also proposed that AU implement an IT fee and phase out of supplying course materials. The CARI designation, the tutor model, academic programs, and location were also explored in this submission.

Respondent #105 questioned the financial status of the university and recommended a financial audit of the finance department at AU Central. The respondent also recommended that the university transition to accrual accounting and implement responsibility-centred



budgeting “to recognize the uniqueness and success of different faculties and ...better determine the areas where the University is not successful or sustainable.”

Respondent #106 observed that a sustainability plan requires succession planning. The writer emphasized AU's commitment to student success and noted that the university should focus on attracting program students. This submission also argued against the hiring of contractors and addressed location.

Respondent #107. This group submission addressed IT, course development and visiting students. IT investments, the submission proposed, should “be strategic and responsive to the academic needs of the instructional and learning community.” The submission called for significant investment in Learning Management Systems which could contribute to a more responsive and agile course development process. Digital data should also be collected to measure and evaluate our course design and course interactions. The submission also emphasized that the university should focus on attracting visiting students. This could be achieved through targeted marketing and renumbering courses to facilitate ease in the transferability of credits. This submission also highlighted AU's strengths: the university's flexible delivery model and a flexible work environment.

Respondent #108. This group submission emphasized that there is a critical need for well-established and understood processes for setting academic priorities in support of successful learning and teaching activities.

Respondent #109 noted that different courses at AU require “different teaching models.” The respondent emphasized that more consultation and collaboration is needed between administrators and faculty about what constitutes effective learning.

Respondent #110. This submission included a consolidated list of comments related to the implementation of the Student Success Centre model. The submission also included two CUPE reports on learner support systems at Athabasca University.

Respondent #111 highlighted the importance of leadership and criticized past executive reviews and dismissal practices. The writer observed that confidence in the administration could be fostered through a commitment to follow effective policies and procedures. The respondent also called on the university to embrace “well-informed, and purposeful change” in course development. The writer concluded by observing that AU can remain sustainable if “unpaced home study distance education remains a viable niche field in the expanding distance education marketplace.” In this context, the writer called on the university to reaffirm its commitment to breaking down barriers to education and proposed that the university seek an alliance with another university which would allow the institution to meet its strategic aims.

Respondent #112 emphasized the need for AU to redefine its mission and vision and encouraged the university to seek a partnership with the federal government. The



respondent also highlighted the importance of the CARI designation and discussed the possibility of federating or amalgamating with another university or college. This submission also explored partnerships and the need to commercialize innovation. The respondent emphasized that “[s]treamlining the number of approval processes and allocating some levels of decision making to the faculties is essential for sustainability.” The submission also explored: the implementation of finance and human resources systems; responsibility-centred budgeting; Open Educational Resources; course delivery models; location; the decanal model; collective agreements; and financial transparency.

Respondent #113 emphasized that the tutor model must be preserved and critiqued the implementation of the Student Success Centre model. The submission highlighted the importance of AU Press and the excellent collaborative work among tutors, faculty, the library, the AU write site, learning services, the Registrar, ComputerHelp Desk, and counseling and disability services. The writer emphasized that AU’s sustainability challenges have been caused by “administrative waste by management” and noted that tutors are “willing to explore efficiencies and examine hybrids of the current [academic delivery] model.”

Respondent #114. This submission focused on academic courses and programs. The respondent recommended that low- enrollment courses be promoted to encourage registrations and noted that current and topical courses should be developed to respond to local, national, and international events. The writer also proposed a “kickstarter” initiative to course development which would engage students in determining course offerings. The respondent concluded by emphasizing that AU personnel should be centrally located in Athabasca and that clear leadership and vision is needed from the executive team on the future of the university.

Respondent #115 called on the university to commit to OpenSource IT solutions as customizing non-OpenSource products requires significant investment. OpenSource technologies, the respondent argued, would result in “more functions, more polish, [and] more [community] participation.”

Respondent #116. This submission emphasized that the university should focus on improving student services. Students should have choice in learning materials and student support centres should be implemented across the institution. The writer also addressed organizational inefficiencies and called for restructuring across all centres, a review of all systems and processes, and an academic course and program audit. The respondent also recommended an expeditious implementation of the responsibility based budgeting model. This submission also addressed location and proposed that the university engage with the federal government to “become better known as ‘Canada’s open online Institution.’”

Respondent #117 addressed the need for units to work together to identify areas for potential collaboration to realize efficiencies. Collaboration would reduce silofication and improve institutional agility. The writer also emphasized the importance of the student





experience in an increasingly crowded field of online post-secondary education. The respondent expressed support for the Student Support Centre model and proposed the implementation of “secret student” initiative that could result in effective feedback on the student experience.

Respondent #118 addressed location, current renovations at the university, leave without pay provisions, and the current funding model. The writer recommended increased marketing efforts to promote the university.

Respondent #119 observed that the university “largely lost track of the spirit of ...[its] mission” which is to “make education available to everyone.” The writer addressed morale at the university and noted that communication needs to be improved so that all members of the AU community can feel that they have the “power to produce change.” The respondent also addressed the need for the university to specialize and foster excellence in a specific area. In this context, the writer recommended an academic program review. This submission also addressed location, noting that operations should remain in Athabasca.

Respondent #120. This group submission emphasized that the sustainability of AU depends on the university’s ability to provide high quality, timely services to students. The submission called on the university to identify its core activities and key priorities to ensure that resources are used effectively and efficiently. This submission also emphasized the important role of the AU Library in supporting courses and programs at the university and highlighted the need for continual access to essential resources and services to ensure that students, faculty, and staff are successful in their work. The submission concluded by recommending the implementation of a staff development program to address knowledge transfer, morale and succession planning.

Respondent #121 advised that AU should give preference to Open Source solutions in the selection of IT systems. Adopting Open Source solutions, the respondent emphasized, would result in cost savings and enable the university to maintain its competitive advantage.

Respondent #122 recommended a course and program audit. The writer also recommended “more explicit, inviting, and easily understood” marketing campaigns. This submission also addressed: staff morale; internet connectivity; professional development; staffing levels, finance and human resources systems and processes; the funding model; and collective agreements.

Respondent #123 observed that the IT department is undergoing corporatization to the detriment of the university. The writer critiqued communication and management in the unit and called for more transparency. The respondent also observed that proprietary IT solutions currently under consideration will result in rigidity in IT software and platforms. This submission also addressed the telework policy, outsourcing, and included several



articles on Open Source solutions.

Respondent #124 provided a brief overview of how AU has managed to survive past financial crises and emphasized that the university must now address its structural challenges. The writer called for an administrative overhaul and addressed organizational culture at the university. The respondent concluded by noting that the university must address its “macro” challenges before any changes and reforms can be made.

Respondent #125 addressed IT solutions at the university, specifically OROS (an add-on to Banner). The writer emphasized that OROS is a low-cost and flexible system that allows the university to control the user experience on the web. The respondent called on the university to reconsider the implementation of Banner self-serve for student-facing systems as OROS reduces staff costs. This submission also addressed the need for the province of Alberta to centralize the delivery of online courses as investing in IT infrastructure is costly. Outsourcing costs and software selection were also addressed in this submission.

Respondent #126. This group submission focused on short term and long term solutions to the university’s sustainability challenges. In the short term, the university should focus on improving the working culture and promoting an effective distributed workforce. In the long term, the university should redefine, reposition, and enhance AU offerings to expanded markets. The submission suggested developing blended programs for international markets. The submission also addressed: the program development process, leadership and management, the role of part-time instructors, credit-transfer agreements, marketing, the university’s learning management system, new revenue streams, partnerships, the quality of courses, and employee retention. Finally, this submission included numerous questions that could be raised to critically assess the future of AU.

Respondent #127 reflected upon AU’s mission and stressed that university should focus on accentuating its role as “Canada’s Open University.” This positioning would provide “a stronger basis for leveraging alternative funding and for boosting enrolments.” The submission also explored: partnerships with Indigenous communities, alternative sources of funding, location, decision-making, employee engagement, and the course development process. The respondent provided six recommendations on these topics.

Respondent #128 focused on the topic of international student recruitment. The writer identified two potential markets: future newcomers to Canada and students in emerging economies.

Respondent #129 focused on potential partnerships. The writer provided an overview of a tuition reimbursement program between Arizona State University and Starbucks and argued that AU is well positioned to pursue a similar partnership. In addition, the respondent observed that AU is positioned to explore partnerships with the travel industry, specifically cruise lines and airlines.



Respondent #130 called on the university to commit to OROS as an IT solution as the system is very brittle and cost-efficient. The submission emphasized the importance of preserving customizable IT software as such software allows the university to stay competitive.

Respondent #131 observed that the university needs to carefully reflect upon its project management processes, specifically those in Information Technology. The writer reflected upon the costs of hiring external project managers and recommended returning “to a lightweight project management process” to contain costs and to ensure the institutional knowledge continues to grow.

Respondent #132 recommended a review of operating budgets in all areas and investment in predictive and business analytics. Analytics could improve the student experience, ensure administrative efficiencies and support strategic decision making. The writer also called for the implementation of different types of non-instructional fees and addressed the need to improve the student experience through new initiatives. This submission also proposed that all post-secondary institutions in Alberta consolidate their human resources, finance, and library services as a cost-savings measure. Finally, the respondent proposed a prepaid tuition scheme which could benefit the university and students.

Respondent #133 questioned the recent outsourcing of IT projects. The writer provided several case studies to demonstrate that internal development is less costly and more sustainable in the long run.

Respondent #134 addressed the recent decision to drop support for MySQL (an open source database). The writer observed that this database required little maintenance and noted that abandoning it will impact other services at the university. The respondent concluded that the university should consider decisions such as these more carefully to ensure that AU is well positioned to adopt innovative IT solutions in the future.

Respondent #135 emphasized that AU must revisit and refine its mandate as the current mandate is too broad and cannot be supported with the current funding model. The writer also called for improved understanding of the university’s costs, recommended a business process audit, and critiqued the management of IT projects. This submission also explored: exam invigilation, the Student Success Centre model, learning resources, the growing use of external project managers, communication, workloads, recruitment, location, records management, and AU Press.

Respondent #136 observed that AU must commit to creating “a world-class university.” The respondent observed that in the past, the university was committed to effective ‘teaching-at-a distance’ practices which included listening to students and “turning traditional curricula inside-out.” The respondent concluded by calling on the university to abandon the faculty structure and improve management practices.



## **APPENDIX B**

### **The Open University and Open Universities Australia**

#### **The Open University**

The Open University (OU) is an online university based in Milton Keynes, UK. Established in 1971, the university prides itself in being “the world’s first successful distance teaching university.” Today, the Open University is one of the largest providers of undergraduate education in the UK. OU serves over 200,000 students in the UK and 50,000 students abroad.

OU offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, non-degree diplomas and certificates, and continuing education courses. Students can choose courses in various subjects or disciplines including: Arts and Humanities; Business and Management; Computing and IT; Design; Education, Childhood and Youth; Engineering; Environment and Development; Health and Social Care; Health and Wellbeing; Languages; Law; Mathematics and Statistics; Medical Sciences; Nursing and Healthcare Practice; Psychology and Counselling; Science; Social Sciences; and Technology.

The Open University is recognized widely for high quality of online instruction. Course delivery at OU takes advantage of the internet, with students learning online and on mobile devices. High tech tools like virtual microscopes have also been adopted. The university also has a strong research portfolio and is regarded as a leader in the exploration of the cosmos.

To date, the university has granted over 1.8 million credentials.

#### **Open Universities Australia**

Open Universities Australia (OUA) is an online higher education leader based in Melbourne, Australia. The organization was established in 1993 under the name Open Learning Agency of Australia Pty Ltd (OLAA or OLA). Soon after its establishment, the agency partnered with the Australian Broadcasting Commission and several public universities to identify, develop, and deliver “new and innovative learning and tertiary educational opportunities to all Australians.” The development of OUA was supported by the federal government who provided funding to allow the organization to develop an “innovative culture.” In 2004, OLA changed its name to Open Universities Australia.

Today, the organization can be described as a public consortium as it is currently owned by seven public Australian universities. While the consortium does not offer academic courses itself, it provides students with the opportunity to enroll in courses and programs at 14 post-secondary institutions across Australia. The OUA provides integrated administrative



and student support services to ensure student success. Governance of OUA is shared among the shareholder institutions.

The consortium is widely recognized for its robust quality assurance framework and excellent support services for students.

Today, OUA serves approximately 60,000 students in Australia and beyond.