



NEWS RELEASE

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A Learning Alberta Government task force focuses on key student concerns

Edmonton - Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) -- In response to the Premier's formation of the A Learning Alberta Steering Committee last year, AUSU drafted and submitted a comprehensive report detailing the concerns of Alberta university students and students of Distance Education.

In the newly released *Final Report of the Steering Committee*, AUSU is heartened to note that many of the concerns and suggestions detailed in the AUSU response have been incorporated into the committee's recommendations and strategies for a world-class Alberta education system.

Specific AUSU requests addressed in the ALA report include needs-based assistance programs that "consider the full range of costs incurred by both full and part-time learners" (ALA, p.17); loans programs that are based on actual living expenses and education costs, assessed annually (Advanced Ed., p.8); a tuition system that limits annual increases to a "more moderate level of growth (i.e. Consumer Price Index)" (ALA, p.17); a shift toward more grants-based student funding to reduce student debt (Advanced Ed., p.7); student loan interest rates limited to prime (Advanced Ed., p.8); better support for part-time learners (ibid, p.10); and, most importantly, that the lifetime loan limit for students be changed to a maximum debt limit so that lifelong learners can access additional education funding once prior loans have been paid off (Advanced Ed., P.9). This last recommendation will do much to address the barriers for lifelong learners, who may be unable to return to school for upgrading or a new degree if they have reached the lifetime loans limit during prior study.

Additionally, the report addresses the AUSU recommendation that the student finance system better coordinate its support systems with those offered by other government support agencies, such as Alberta Income Support (ibid, p.17). Especially exciting is the recommendation to ensure that students of Distance Education are provided with adequate resources to complete a quality education (Advanced Ed., P.7). AUSU has lobbied for increased recognition of the needs of students of distance education who require access to a computer with internet access and up-to-date software to perform quality research through cutting edge resources.

The committee's recommended education strategy also acknowledges the importance of recognizing prior learning and making it easy for students to continue learning by upgrading prior degrees. Athabasca University is already a world leader in Prior Learning Assessment and allows the laddering of degrees to reduce redundancy in the upgrading process. AUSU President, Lisa Priebe, notes that "AU students are pleased that these innovative strategies to foster lifelong learning are being recognized and that the value of open and distance education continues to increase. While many universities are geared toward younger students who will obtain a single degree credential, AU fosters learning that continues throughout the lifetime and many AU grads later return to obtain another degree or to upgrade a previous credential.

In the current labour market, where new opportunities are presented every day, we believe that this system allows people to maximize their job satisfaction and personal growth potential throughout their lifetimes. The days of the single career in a lifetime are over and it's very exciting time to be part of the workforce."

Of particular interest to AUSU is the Committee's recommendation that Alberta develop an accountability framework to ensure that Alberta students and educational institutions are attaining benchmarks set by national and international peer jurisdictions (Advanced Ed. Subcommittee, p.4). AUSU believes that the introduction of new quality measures is necessary to ensure that Alberta remains a place where unequalled opportunities are available to persons of all ages and occupations.

AUSU also supports the ALA Committee's goals of ensuring that at least 90% of all Albertans attain a high level of literacy, increasing retention of graduate students in the province, attracting world-class faculty, and making Alberta one of the "top two jurisdictions for natural/physical sciences as well as social sciences/humanities research activity" (ALA, p.20).

Finally, AUSU is pleased that the Advanced Education Subcommittee has recommended that additional funding opportunities be provided to allow institutions to "support technology development, infrastructure, and enhance technology utilization within the advanced education system" (Advanced Ed., p.12). As Alberta's "virtual" university, AU has often been under-funded for its technological infrastructure requirements as the outmoded funding system bases funding on the physical infrastructure of the university. AUSU believes that a focus on physical infrastructure is not cost-effective, and limits the opportunities provided by more university seats to specific locales where new buildings are erected.

Overall, AUSU is very pleased that most of its recommendations and concerns have been addressed by the Steering Committee, though a greater focus on the opportunities that can be provided by our virtual university -- the only university in North America that is an accredited degree provider in both Canada and the United States -- would have helped further address many of the issues of accessibility and flexibility that the Steering Committee has noted.

For more information about this release, contact Tamra Ross, Executive Director, AUSU, at 1-800-788-9041 extension 2905 or email executivedirector@ausu.org.

AUSU represents more than 35,000 undergraduate students of Athabasca University by providing advocacy, support, financial aid and an online student community for all members. AUSU also advocates for the rights of students of distance education world-wide, and seeks to educate the general public about the exceptional quality and value of a degree earned through distance education through Athabasca University.

References:

A Learning Alberta (ALA) (May 2006). Final Report of the Steering Committee. Alberta Advanced Education.

Advance Education System Subcommittee (May 2006). Recommendations from Transforming the Advanced Education System Subcommittee. Alberta Advanced Education.