



# ALBERTA 2030: BUILDING SKILLS FOR JOBS

System Review Submission

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## Who is Athabasca University Students' Union?

Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) is an independent, student-run organization representing the undergraduate students of Athabasca University. AUSU serves over 40,000 members annually. Athabasca University is an open and online university; students are located all across Canada and even across the globe. In any given month, AUSU's membership is over 26,000 active students, which includes 16,500 Albertans.

Student unions are a vital component to the learning environment and the campus community through the support and services they offer their membership to enrich the university experience. AUSU offers a wide variety of services to its members, including but not limited to: student awards and bursaries, career development and video micro-learning through LinkedIn Learning, resumé writing assistance and support through VMock, and student wellness support. AUSU also advocates on behalf of all undergraduate Athabasca University students. AUSU is unique among student associations as it represents students in every province and territory in Canada.

The Athabasca University Students' Union can be contacted anytime by sending an email to President Natasha Donahue at [president@ausu.org](mailto:president@ausu.org) or Vice-President External and Student Affairs Stacey Hutchings at [vpex@ausu.org](mailto:vpex@ausu.org).

## What makes Athabasca University different?

Athabasca University (AU) is Alberta's only online, open university. AU is accessible to all Albertans through its ability to provide asynchronous learning opportunities in an online platform. AU students have the ability to gain the credentials and skills they require to either improve their employment prospects, or to advance within their current employment. Many learners do this all while working and therefore are contributing members within the economy.

AU is also Alberta's gem as it attracts students from all over the country and the world to a world-class, Canadian accredited education with an institution that has a reputation for providing high-quality undergraduate programming with standards other institutions trust.

AU has been an institution for 50 years and has been a part of many post-secondary students' experiences, whether through the ability to take supplemental courses to transfer back to their home institution in order to finisher their degree at a faster rate, the ability to upgrade skills on a course-by-course basis, or through students deciding to attend AU full- or part-time as a program student. AU is open and is therefore accessible to anyone over the age of 16.<sup>1</sup> AU also has a prior learning assessment process that recognizes past work experience and allow the learner to apply this experience to their program.<sup>2</sup> This allows students to apply their previous experience as credits towards their credential. This reduces the costs on the post-secondary system and allows the learner to achieve their program completion goals at a faster rate.

*AU is the choice for the mature learner through its online, asynchronous, and open method of course delivery, its ability to recognize past experience towards program credit, and its open format that allows anyone to attend.*

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<sup>1</sup> Athabasca University, "Admission Requirements," accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.athabascau.ca/admissions/requirements/#tab1>.

<sup>2</sup> Athabasca University, "Centre for Learning Accreditation (PLAR)," accessed October 5, 2020, <http://priorlearning.athabascau.ca/>.

## What makes Athabasca University an Asset to Learners?

Athabasca University is a great and flexible option for pursuing post-secondary studies for students across Alberta and beyond. It is also a great investment for Alberta as it allows the province to not only offer quality, open, and online education to Albertans, but also showcases our province across the country and around the world.

How does the distance education model of Athabasca University support the vision of a prosperous Alberta?

- **Diverse learners** - Making post-secondary education accessible and tearing down barriers through distance and flexibility means AU has the most diverse student body in the province.
- **Rural accessibility** - Athabasca University students can study from home or from anywhere in the world, making it a great choice for rural Albertans. Currently, 13,627 Albertans are studying at Athabasca University from outside Calgary and Edmonton. Athabasca University also has strong links to the communities in Rural and Northern Alberta.
- **Studying while working** - Distance education allows students to continue with their career and support the economy while completing their post-secondary education, an option 83% of Athabasca University students take.
- **Collaboration with other institutions** - A third of AU undergraduate students are not just students at Athabasca University, they are also students at various institutions across Canada including every post-secondary campus in Alberta. Athabasca University also has established partnerships with various education institutions across the province.
- **Innovative learning** - Athabasca University is at the very forefront of using technology in post-secondary education

## Why Athabasca University is the future for PSE in Alberta.

- **Economically**, AU has an open and online format that allows AU to experience infinite growth as it is not constrained to a place and space to operate.
- **Remote learning** allows learners to achieve their goals of higher learning without having to leave their communities.
- **Accessible education** through AU's flexible, online format allows AU to be an institution that students with accessibility, work, or caregiving needs can more easily attend.
- **Life experience** recognized at AU through its Prior Learning Assessment Recognition program lets learners achieve program credits for applicable life experience saving the learner and the province money.
- **Flexible** asynchronous learning allows the learner to attend to work, caregiving and other obligations all while achieving a higher education credential.
- **Open** admission means that the barrier to entry is 16 years of age (although exceptions to this are made as well). Therefore, higher education is accessible to any learner no matter their life experience.

## Strengthening Post-Secondary Participation and Accommodating Growing Enrolment Demands

Athabasca University has a history of efficiency within Alberta's post-secondary educational system. This is due to an inequality of institutional funding that has resulted in a lower proportion of funding per learner to the university compared to other post-secondary institutions in the province. This is not something that is experienced by other Alberta post-secondary institutions who are currently delivering online learning due to COVID-19. Funding for post-secondary education is a provincial jurisdiction and has led to Canadian learners having to bear the brunt of inequitable access to higher education based on their regional location. This creates undue hardship by passing on additional costs to students in the form of differential tuition.<sup>3</sup>

Average public funding per full-time student across Canada is about \$10,100 a year - substantially higher than the \$5,000 per full-time student at AU. AU has to operate with substantially less when compared to British Columbia at \$9,748 and Ontario at \$7,841 per full-time student.<sup>4</sup> With this chronic underfunding at AU, any more funding changes would have a negative impact on AU's ability to deliver world-class education. AU has proven itself to be efficient, however this has caused the institution to fall behind in its ability to provide affordable and accessible education. Open and online education needs to be prioritized within Alberta's post-secondary system. AU's chronic underfunding compared to other Alberta post-secondary institutions is a symptom of that lack of prioritization.

	GOA 2020 Grant <sup>5</sup>	Full-Load Equivalents <sup>6</sup>	Grant per FLE
University of Alberta	\$645 million	36,102	\$17,866 per FLE
University of Calgary	\$475 million	30,105	\$15,778 per FLE
University of Lethbridge	\$108 million	6,989	\$15,452 per FLE
All colleges	\$453 million	34,331	\$13,195 per FLE
All polytechnics	\$352 million	27,099	\$12,989 per FLE
Mount Royal University	\$103 million	10,112	\$10,186 per FLE
MacEwan University	\$110 million	12,751	\$8,627 per FLE
<b>Athabasca University</b>	<b>\$44 million</b>	<b>9,375</b>	<b>\$4,693 per FLE</b>

AU is Alberta's post-secondary gem and is referred to nationally by learners as the go-to institution to meet their post-secondary goals. Receiving less government funding per student means this cost is downloaded to the learner. AU is the only public institution in Alberta where the majority of revenue

<sup>3</sup> "Tuition and Fees at Athabasca University," accessed on October 7, 2020, <https://www.athabascau.ca/admissions/tuition-fees/>.

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Association of University Teachers Almanac, "Provincial Government Funding Per FTE," accessed on October 7, 2020, <https://www.caut.ca/resources/almanac/2-canada-provinces>.

<sup>5</sup> "Alberta Advanced Education Annual Report 2019-20," accessed on October 7, 2020, <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2371-2104>, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> "System-Wide FLE Enrolment within the Alberta Post-Secondary System," accessed on October 7, 2020, <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/system-wide-fle-enrolment-within-the-alberta-post-secondary-education-system>.

does not come from public funding, but rather from student tuition.<sup>7</sup> The impact of this goes beyond just AU's virtual classrooms and impacts the ability of the institution to deliver basic student services. AU's growth has also created the need for investment in digital infrastructures, rather than physical infrastructures that a brick-and-mortar institution would invest in. Digital infrastructures, such as creating a new virtual learning environment, should be a shared expense with the public and future students who will enjoy those benefits.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light the need to develop robust and high-quality accessible online education so that those who are out of work can retrain and enter new fields and allow individuals to upgrade their credentials to remain competitive within an uncertain job market. Indigenous, rural, and urban communities have all struggled with COVID-19 due to digital access issues such as broadband. This requires ongoing and meaningful investments in digital infrastructure – and Athabasca University is not alone in this need. The Alberta Government must prioritize its digital infrastructure investments in order to compete globally.

Consistent and equitable funding of PSE education in Alberta would ensure that all students attending an institution in Alberta, whether that is in person or online, receive the same level of funding from the government of Alberta toward their institution of choice to ensure reliable and consistent tuition. This will allow students the ability to budget and plan for the duration of their degree what their anticipated costs will be.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Address funding inequalities within post-secondary system to ensure that institutions can become national leaders in providing high-quality education.***
- ***Prioritization of digital infrastructures when allocating resources and planning for the future in Alberta's post-secondary system.***
- ***Rebalance available operating funding among post-secondary institutions to ensure that Athabasca University, Alberta's most efficient public post-secondary institution, receives comparable funding per student as other post-secondary institutions so that AU has the resources needed to provide a world-class education to tens of thousands of people. Athabasca University is experiencing increased enrolment growth and offers a scalable platform for learning – provided the necessary resources are made available.***
- ***Post-secondary education should be accessible and sensitive to the needs of traditionally under-represented in the system, such as Indigenous students, students from rural Alberta, and students with accessibility issues.***

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<sup>7</sup> "Alberta Advanced Education Annual Report 2019-20," accessed on October 7, 2020, <https://open.alberta.ca/publications/2371-2104>, p. 75.



## Work Experience and the Mature Learner

At Athabasca University, over 70% of learners are already in the workforce.<sup>8</sup> Athabasca University is the institution learners turn to when looking for credentials they require to facilitate their desired career growth. Many AU students have expressed an interest in work-integrated learning opportunities; however, resources are required to facilitate these opportunities. Chronic underfunding makes it difficult for AU to deliver work-integrated learning.

It is important that the Government of Alberta recognizes the role distance education plays in providing learning opportunities for those who are already working and to ensure students who are looking for work-integrated opportunities have equitable access that is not limited by their age. The Canada Summer Jobs program was introduced to provide students with top-quality work experience with Canadian employers<sup>9</sup>, but is limited to those who are under 30. The average age of an AU undergraduate is 29 years.<sup>10</sup> The Alberta Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) provided opportunities to all Alberta students in order to gain experience needed to participate in and grow within the job market.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately it is important to recognize the unique learner demographic that online distance education represents. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to facilitating work experience, but collaboration with industry along with allocation of resources from the Government of Alberta will make work-integrated learning, summer employment programs, and co-ops a reality for learners at Athabasca University.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***Online distance education should be recognized as an ideal method for creating work-integrated and work-adjacent learning opportunities for Alberta students.***
- ***Resources should be allocated to facilitate work-integrated learning and co-op programs while also recognizing learners' current employment statuses as facilitating their learning experience.***
- ***Reinstate the Summer Temporary Employment Program to give mature students the ability to attain summer training that allows them to graduate with both the credentials and experience needed to fully participate within the economy.***

<sup>8</sup> "Athabasca At A Glance," accessed October 7, 2020, <https://www.athabascau.ca/aboutau/glance/>.

<sup>9</sup> "Funding: Canada Summer Jobs – Overview - Canada.Ca," accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/funding/canada-summer-jobs.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Athabasca University, "Facts and Statistics," accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.athabascau.ca/aboutau/media/aufacts/>.

<sup>11</sup> "Summer Temporary Employment Program (STEP) Guidelines," accessed October 5, 2020, <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/e1b352f5-792a-4d7c-b63a-0e5b0bdeac53/resource/75db83cf-fd9a-496b-8fbb-f1ee7f864cfa/download/stepguidelines.pdf>.

## Affordability of Post-Secondary Education

The cost of education is a barrier for many current and future students. Education is the key to participation in the labour market. The increasing cost of living, accompanied with tuition increases, is exacerbated by the unique financial needs of the mature learner. This has created barriers for mature learners to attend higher education. Alberta's current student financial aid system must ensure higher education remains affordable and accessible to all Albertans, regardless of their status in life. Alberta's financial aid system must evolve to recognize the unique needs of mature undergraduate learners, who do not enter post-secondary institutions after high school, and who are not able to live with guardians while taking classes full-time in a physical classroom. Many mature students have dependents or are caregivers themselves to others in their life while also paying for housing, food, and other living costs. This review represents an ideal opportunity to revisit Alberta's student financial aid system to ensure it meets the needs of every learner, including mature learners.

AUSU wants to ensure student financial aid keeps pace with the rising cost of education and cost of living, and that it is easy to apply for and receive. A robust student grant system that is accessible to mature learners, students with dependents, and part-time students is also required so that access to student aid does not produce a burden of high student debt.

The majority of student financial aid - whether in the form of non-repayable financial aid such as grants, bursaries, and scholarships; or repayable aid in the form of loans - is exclusively for full-time students. Athabasca University's model allows thousands of students to pursue their studies part-time rather than full-time, but Albertans looking for direct financial support for tuition and other costs while pursuing part-time studies are left with minimal aid from the federal government, and none from the Government of Alberta. The Government of Alberta must expand the criteria for student loans to include part-time students.

As Alberta is shifting to a new economy, many Albertans are not working and are interested in a career change or want to invest in themselves in order to advance within their current career. There are currently barriers to achieve these goals, as many students attending post-secondary institutions have financial commitments, such as dependents they need to support, while trying to achieve the education required to advance their own personal circumstances. Many of these students are upgrading their skills to contribute to the economy and are unable to find funding to support their efforts due to lifetime student loan limits and monthly loan maximums.

Currently, Alberta has a lifetime loan limit of \$75,000 for a bachelor's degree. This limit is increasingly presenting as a barrier due to rising living and tuition costs. As this is a lifetime limit, those who attended post-secondary earlier in their lives are unable to qualify for more loans to support their need to diversify their skills to participate in the economy, even if they have paid the loans back in full. Equitable access to higher education must be a priority within this review.

Additionally, the Alberta Government does not currently extend supports to students with disabilities. The Federal government does offer supports for students with disabilities, but this alone is not enough

to create an equitable education.<sup>12,13</sup> Many students with disabilities require more time to complete their studies and this results in them incurring more costs. Equitable access to higher education must extend more resources to students with accessibility needs in order to access higher education without finishing with a large debt load. This will allow for equitable access to the labour market for all individuals and help Albertans contribute to the economy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***The Alberta Financial Aid system must recognize the unique needs of the growing mature learner population, and there must be more upfront grants and completion grants to ensure mature students do not graduate from their program with a large debt load.***
- ***The Alberta Financial Aid system must adapt and allow part-time learners the ability to access the resources needed to attend higher education, which will allow Albertans to invest in themselves and to allow career growth opportunities.***
- ***The life-time loan limit is a barrier for mature students with dependents. The financial aid system must revisit life-time loan limits to ensure they do not prevent Albertans from completing their programs or create unnecessary barriers to access funding when previously awarded loans have been paid back in full.***
- ***The Financial Aid System must evolve to ensure mature students and students with disabilities are able to access the resources needed to attain a higher education. This can be accomplished through providing upfront grants, scholarships, bursaries and completion grants.***
- ***Completion grants will incentivize students to complete their programs of study and will ensure students do not finish with high debt loads. Not only will this encourage students to finish their program, but it will allow these students to participate fully in the Alberta economy.***

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<sup>12</sup> “Canada Student Grant for Services and Equipment for Students with Permanent Disabilities,” accessed September 24, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/services/benefits/education/student-aid/grants-loans/disabilities-service-equipment.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Government of Canada, “Canada Student Grant for Students with Permanent Disabilities,” accessed October 5, 2020, <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/services/education/grants/disabilities.html>.

## Student as Decision Makers in Governance of Post-Secondary Education

Post-Secondary students in Alberta need to continue to play a prominent role in their institutions. Students should be involved in the planning, financial, and decision-making processes to ensure the intention of the system - to serve students to allow them to become productive citizens within Alberta – is not lost. Students should be in a position where they can hold their institutions accountable for the tuition and fees they are collecting.

Currently, students sit on the Board of Governors and the General Faculty's Council. Student Associations are mandated within the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* to ensure the framework is in place to support the student community, but also facilitate students to become key decision-makers. Having students as decision-makers has created countless work integrated opportunities for students. Students have gained invaluable experience representing their peers on councils, committees, and boards. These are real-life practical experiences that are training future leaders. By not maintaining a strong student voice and role in these decision-making spheres, students will not have the same chances early in their careers to have these prominent leadership roles.

Athabasca University is no different. Athabasca University relies on its Student Associations to fulfill important consulting roles in addition to being voting members on the Board of Governors. As AU is a distanced-based institution, the student voice that is needed is unique within the post-secondary system. Ensuring that every student can be a key decision-maker for their specific institution will accommodate the differences each institution services.

The *Post-Secondary Learning Act* has important and vital protections of the role of individual elected student associations, and AUSU feels this must remain in any re-envisioned post-secondary educational governance system. It is a strength that has led to an improved student experience at Athabasca University as it has at every public institution in Alberta.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

- ***AUSU Recommends that elected student councils should continue to have a strong, protected, and independent voice in decision-making at Athabasca University.***
- ***The Post-Secondary Learning Act has important and vital protections of the role of individual elected student associations, and AUSU feels this must remain in any re-envisioned post-secondary education system. It is a strength that has led to an improved student experience at Athabasca University as it has at every public institution in Alberta.***

## Conclusion

Athabasca University Students' Union is committed to representing its members, many of whom do not fit the stereotype of a post-secondary student. Whether they are picking up a course or two that is not accessible at their home institution or to train a specific skill, or whether they are a mature student who has needs and commitments outside of their studies, AUSU wants to ensure all students are considered when important decisions are made that impact their education. This is especially true for the recommendations being drafted for the Alberta 2030: Building Skills for Jobs report.

Athabasca University has filled a void within the post-secondary market that has benefitted students all over the province, country, and around the world. AU has allowed thousands of students to attain a higher education who would not traditionally have been able to due to their location, accessibility, and life needs. There are still many obstacles AU students face because of their diverse backgrounds.

The average age of an AU undergraduate student is 29, and many of these students have obligations to attend to outside of going to school. This can include working full-time, childcare, and eldercare. The rising cost of tuition and the increasing cost of living put further strain on students completing their studies. AUSU recognizes the importance of higher education in allowing citizens to participate in a meaningful and substantial way in the economic and labour market. The Government of Alberta must ensure that students can graduate from their programs without experiencing high debt levels. Further, students with disabilities and accessibility needs should have equitable access to education so they can fully participate in the labour market. They should not have to experience a higher debt burden due to their accessibility and disability needs.

Finally, AUSU affirms the importance of the student voice within post-secondary education governance structures. Students, who are at the heart of post-secondary education, should have a strong and vital role in the system's direction-setting. Further, students must be the leaders for decision-making within their universities to ensure their needs are reflected within their institution.

Athabasca University is a gem within the province of Alberta. It is an institution that has provided so many opportunities to students because of its open, online, and accessible format. AUSU is proud to represent its members who will experience the future of higher education: a system with an innovative design that allows students to study, work, volunteer, and attend to other life experiences a brick-and-mortar university is not flexible enough to accommodate. Therefore, AUSU asks the Government of Alberta to ensure resources are in place to support Athabasca University to allow students to continue to experience open, accessible, and affordable online education. AUSU also recommends that students who do not fall into the category of a stereotypical post-secondary student are fiscally supported to allow their continued participation in the economic and labour markets.

## SUMMARY OF AUSU RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Address funding inequalities within post-secondary system to ensure that institutions can become national leaders in providing high-quality education.*
- *Prioritization of digital infrastructures when allocating resources and planning for the future in Alberta's post-secondary system.*
- *Rebalance available operating funding among post-secondary institutions to ensure that Athabasca University, Alberta's most efficient public post-secondary institution, receives comparable funding per student as other post-secondary institutions so that AU has the resources needed to provide a world-class education to tens of thousands of people. Athabasca University is experiencing increased enrolment growth and offers a scalable platform for learning – provided the necessary resources are made available.*
- *Post-secondary education should be accessible and sensitive to the needs of traditionally under-represented in the system, such as Indigenous students, students from rural Alberta, and students with accessibility issues.*
- *Online distance education should be recognized as an ideal method for creating work-integrated and work-adjacent learning opportunities for Alberta students.*
- *Resources should be allocated to facilitate work-integrated learning and co-op programs while also recognizing learners' current employment statuses as facilitating their learning experience.*
- *Reinstate the Summer Temporary Employment Program to give mature students the ability to attain summer training that allows them to graduate with both the credentials and experience needed to fully participate within the economy.*
- *The Alberta Financial Aid system must recognize the unique needs of the growing mature learner population, and there must be more upfront grants and completion grants to ensure mature students do not graduate from their program with a large debt load.*
- *The Alberta Financial Aid system must adapt and allow part-time learners the ability to access the resources needed to attend higher education, which will allow Albertans to invest in themselves and to allow career growth opportunities.*
- *The life-time loan limit is a barrier for mature students with dependents. The financial aid system must revisit life-time loan limits to ensure they do not prevent Albertans from completing their programs or create unnecessary barriers to access funding when previously awarded loans have been paid back in full.*

- *The Financial Aid System must evolve to ensure mature students and students with disabilities are able to access the resources needed to attain a higher education. This can be accomplished through providing upfront grants, scholarships, bursaries, and completion grants.*
- *Completion grants will incentivize students to complete their programs of study and will ensure students do not finish with high debt loads. Not only will this encourage students to finish their program, but it will allow these students to participate fully in the Alberta economy.*
- *Elected student councils should continue to have a strong, protected, and independent voice in decision-making at Athabasca University.*
- *The Post-Secondary Learning Act has important and vital protections of the role of individual elected student associations, and AUSU feels this must remain in any re-envisioned post-secondary education system. It is a strength that has led to an improved student experience at Athabasca University as it has at every public institution in Alberta.*