POLICY 9.28

POSITION POLICY

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Advocacy

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) regarding advocating for the inclusion and equitable treatment of equity-seeking groups in our virtual campus community, including, but not limited to:

a) recognizing that AUSU serves members from diverse identities, experiences, and backgrounds;

b) acknowledging that the intersectional nature of these backgrounds, of which students may experience systemic inequities in the form of visible and invisible barriers;

c) advocating for the equitable and inclusive treatment of all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, national origin, gender, gender identity, gender expression, marital or family status, religion or faith, sexual orientation, disability, accessibility need, language, size, social class, age, and/or geographical location;

d) advocating for the safety, inclusion and equitable treatment of racialized student learners;

e) advocate the needs of Indigenous learners to Athabasca University (AU) as recommended by the Indigenous Circle at AUSU;

f) advocate the needs of Indigenous learners to external stakeholders at a provincial and federal level to ensure systemic barriers faced by Indigenous learners are brought forward;[1]

g) supporting Nukskahtowin's Indigenization and decolonization initiatives as outlined in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Calls to Action and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP);[2]

h) supporting the 2020 Nukskahtowin Strategic Plan;[3]

i) hosting an annual consultation with Nukskahtowin to build a strong relationships and share knowledge;

j) advocating that course content is respectful and representative of students' various identities;

k) advocating for the implementation of the goals and recommendations of the Scarborough Charter on Anti-Black Racism and Black Inclusion in Higher Education;

l) advocating for affirming name changes for 2SLGBTQIA+ students, as well as students in various circumstances, at AU, as outlined in Policy 9.30 Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Advocacy;

m) advocating for an accessible online educational experience and continued improvements to the accessibility of online campus infrastructure, as outlined in the AU position policy for Accessibility Services; [4]

n) advocating for increased support of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse students, and those requiring mental health supports as outlined in Policy 2.21;

o) advocating for supports, such as learning strategists, psychoeducational assessments, and increased staffing at Accessibility Services;

p) advocating for the improvement of services and course availability for learners who are incarcerated;

q) advocating for the needs of international learners;

r) applying an EDI lens while advocating to municipal, provincial, and federal governments and ensuring AUSU advocacy partners continue to hold these same values;

s) advocating for all AU staff, administration, and faculty to receive EDI training to ensure that they understand the lived student experience, especially while studying in an online environment
t) advocating that AU staff receive cultural sensitivity training, as well as implicit bias training, particularly those in counselling and/or crisis management roles; and
u) advocating that AU staff who work with students implement culturally-sensitive and trauma-informed sexual violence policies, programming, and student supports.

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University's (AU) mandate to provide open and accessible education for all students, allows for the enrolment of students from a variety of socio-economic demographics. In particular, AU's unique online framework provides opportunities for a variety of students who may be unable to attend traditional brick and mortar institutions, including mature learners, rural learners, disabled learners, learners with accessibility needs, learners with dependents, and learners who are incarcerated. Despite AU's position to support the needs of all types of learners, numerous systemic barriers remain, many of which can negatively affect students' educational journeys, as well as preventing students from completing their studies.

Barriers to education can include physical, technological, systemic, financial, or attitudinal barriers, as well as institutional failure to provide accommodations.[5]

Taking an intersectional approach, as originally developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, is key to understanding and dismantling these barriers. Intersectionality, as originally developed by Crenshaw to describe oppression against Black women,[6] has been expanded and currently refers to "the theory that the overlap of various social identities, as race, gender, sexuality, and class, contributes to the specific type of systemic oppression and discrimination experienced by an individual"[7] or group.

In particular, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has revealed and underscored many of the disparities faced by equity-seeking individuals and groups. While severe socio-economic repercussions have been felt in all aspects of society, many of these individuals and communities have been disproportionately affected.[8] In particular, in Canada, there have been unprecedented disruptions in social and economic lives.[9]

The pandemic has also underscored the disparities for rural students, as well as those in remote and Northern communities. However, with increased Internet usage and the continued closure of in-person invigilation centres, rural, as well as urban, AU students are facing issues with digital accessibility and broadband problems.[10]

In Canada, learners from a variety of diverse identities, experiences, and backgrounds face racism, discrimination, and exclusion during post-secondary studies, in their later academic careers,[11] as well as in their daily personal and professional lives. Given AU's online framework that attracts students from across the nation and the world, it is fair to say that AU students face similar barriers.

For example, while a shift to an increasingly online format has reduced many barriers to education for some, these formats, including the transition to e-texts have paradoxically created barriers for AU's learners who are incarcerated, as well as learners with accessibility needs.

In addition, Indigenous students continue to face persistent socio-economic disparities, as a result of colonial history, including the residential school system, and the 60s Scoop, as well as continued systemic barriers. For example just over 10% of Indigenous learners obtain post-secondary degrees, as opposed to 30% of non-Indigenous Canadians.[12] Of 2015's Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's (TRC) 94 Calls to Action, 19 have direct implications for post-secondary institutions, including increased funding and resources.

A 2019 survey by Indspire revealed that Indigenous learners desired increased Indigenous content, mandatory Indigenous history training for staff and employees, and increased Indigenous teaching and mentorship resources. Forty-five percent of Indigenous learners revealed that they have experienced racism, a sense of isolation, or marginalization during their post-secondary studies. Many stated that initiatives to include Indigenous culture would make them feel more welcome, as well as the recognition of the emotional labour that must often be performed, including facilitating cross-cultural understanding and defending Indigenous worldviews.[13]

Additionally, disabled students face additional barriers including inadequate funding, negative attitudes, bullying, stereotypes, inadequate accommodations and support processes, as well as physical inaccessibility. Many of these students take fewer courses and take longer to complete their degrees, many end their educational journey early, which many are then limited in their career choice.[14] This also often results in increasing debt.

Finally, since the onset of the #MeToo movement, many students have come forward with increased reports of sexual and gender-based violence throughout Canada's brick and mortar based institutions. According to a 2019 study, 71% of Canadian students have witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours in a post-secondary setting.[15] To address these rates, the Government of Canada has begun implementing a 5-year Framework to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence at Post-Secondary Institutions.[16] Despite AU's unique online framework, AU students are affected by this type of violence in their personal and professional lives. In addition, AU students may also encounter this type of violence during practicum placements, undergraduate research placements, potential work-integrated learning, and co-op opportunities. In particular, 2SLGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming individuals, including those of the often overlapping disabled and racialized identities, as well as those from lower socio-economic classes, often face disproportionate rates of violence.[17][18]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) and all levels of government to acknowledge and remove systemic barriers to education.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to improve accessibility for equity-seeking students.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to ensure that an EDI lens is applied to course content, and that course content is respectful and representative of students' identities.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to apply an EDI lens to all communications, ensuring inclusive-language.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to apply an EDI lens when hiring staff and contractors.

ENDNOTES

[1] Athabasca University Students' Union. (2020). Policy 9.25: Access to education for Indigenous learners in Canada. Retrieved February 16, 2021, from https://www.ausu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Policy 9.25-Indigenous-Learners.pdf.

[2] Athabasca University. (2020). Nukskahtowin * Meeting Place. Retrieved January 5, 2021, from http://indigenous.athabascau.ca/.

[3] Athabasca University. (2020). Nukskahtowin Plan 2020. Retrieved January 5, 2021, from http://indigenous.athabascau.ca/documentation/Nukskahtowin-Plan-2020.pdf.

[4] Athabasca University (2020). Policy Accessibility Services. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from http://asd.athabascau.ca/policy/index.php.
   Ontario Human Rights Commission. Main barriers to education for students with disabilities (fact sheet). Retrieved January 11, 2021, from http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/main-barriers-education-students disabilities-fact-sheet.

[6] Columbia Law School. (2017). Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality, more than two decades later. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later.

[7] Dictionary.Com. Intersectionality. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.dictionary.com/browse/intersectionality.

[8] UNDP. COVID-19: Socio-economic impact. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/coronavirus/socio-economic-impact-of-covid-19.html.

[9] Statistics Canada. (2021). The social and economic impacts of COVID-19: A Six-month Update. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11-631-x/11-631-x2020004-eng.htm.

[10] Garel, Connor. (2020). Poor internet connection in rural Canada is making online school a nightmare. Huffington Post. Retrieved February 16, 2021, from https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/internet-connection-online-school-coronavirus_ca_5ebeb9f1c5b6e5d22c6c071a.

[11] Eisenkraft, Harriet. (2020). Racism in the academy. University Affairs. Retrieved February 16, 2021, from https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/racism-in-the-academy/.

[12] Universities Canada. (2018). Advancing reconciliation through postsecondary education. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from https://www.univcan.ca/media-room/media-releases/advancing-reconciliation-through-postsecondary-education/.

[13] Indspire. (2019). Truth and Reconciliation in post-secondary settings: Student experience. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from https://indspire.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/JMGD_003_IND_TR_REPORT_FINAL_V3_NOV15_V3.pdf.

[14] Canadian Human Rights Commission.Left Out: Challenges faced by persons with disabilities in Canada's schools. Retrieved January 11, 2021, from https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/left-out-challenges-faced-persons-disabilities-canadas-schools.

[15] Statistics Canada. (2019). Students' experiences of unwanted sexualized behaviours and sexual assault at postsecondary schools in the Canadian provinces, 2019. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00005-eng.htm.

[16] Possibility Seeds. (2021). GBV on campus framework. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from https://www.possibilityseeds.ca/gbv-on-campus-framework.

[17] City of Toronto. (2021). Gender-based violence. Retrieved January 12, 2021, from https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/health-wellness-care/health-programs-advice/gender-based-violence/.

[18] Canadian Mental Health Association. (2021). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans & queer identified people and mental health. Retrieved February 16, 2021, from https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-queer-identified-people-and-mental-health/.