Position Policy Manual
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AUSU Position Policy Manual

AUSU advocacy initiatives are guided by the student membership. The needs or concerns brought forward by students are taken to our important stakeholders (such as the university or the government) at local, municipal, provincial, or federal levels as necessary– until those concerns are heard.
To clearly articulate student issues, position policies are created and approved by AUSU council. Many policies have been taken on, and some have been rescinded throughout the years– however, policies are only removed as **your concerns are addressed**. Below you will find our current position policies and resolutions. The policies and their resolutions are evidence and research-based, and they are the official stance of council on the issues at hand. They form the official statements and can be referenced whenever questions or concerns are raised. They are also the documents used by AUSU student representatives to bring your concerns to the attention of our colleagues and stakeholders.

POLICY 9.01

POSITION POLICY

Tuition and Fees

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding tuition and fees for distance-delivery programming.

POLICY RESEARCH

The Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education has made a commitment to tuition that is both accessible and affordable.[1] As Athabasca University (AU) is similarly committed to the removal of barriers that restrict access to university level study,[2] AUSU Council supports changes to regulations regarding out-of-province learners.

The out-of-province distance-delivery programming fee is exempt from the Tuition Fee Regulation portion of the Post-Secondary Learning Act (PSLA),[3] and approximately two-thirds of Athabasca University undergraduate students participate in distance-delivery programming from outside of Alberta.[4] Changes to the PSLA, limit tuition increases for Alberta-based students to a maximum increase equal to the Alberta all-goods Consumer Price Index following three increases of a maximum of 7% within three years from 2020 to 2023. Since the majority of AU students are out-of-province, they are not limited to the CPI limit; they have seen heavy increases alongside Alberta students and will face potential tuition increases when Alberta students will see inflationary increases. Other changes require international student tuition increases to be predictable throughout a standard four-year degree program, although they too have seen steep increases at Alberta institutions.[5] AUSU Council believes all students should have a level of predictability to their tuition.

Athabasca University remains the only Alberta institution that charges different tuition rates for Canadians who reside outside of Alberta. In Canada, only Athabasca University and universities in Quebec charge more for students out-of-province.[6] The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of mobility to all Canadian citizens and while specific exemptions are made for the provision of public services that include education, it is important to note many public services are provided to any Canadian citizen, regardless of their province of residence without onerous fees or extra charges.[7]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union supports tuition predictability and affordability for all students, including out-of-province distance students in the Tuition Fees Regulation of the Post-Secondary Learning Act.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union oppose increases to tuition that exceed the Alberta CPI without proper consultation and approval of the affected students through their student council.

POLICY 9.02

POSITION POLICY

Exam Invigilation Fees

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the cost of exam invigilation services for students who cannot attend an established, free in-person exam invigilation centre.

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University (AU) once offered exam invigilation at the AU Exam Centres where the student not incur a fee. In 2020, these locations were closed and students are required to book their own AU-approved invigilator often at an out-of-pocket cost.

Alternatively, students can choose to use the online invigilator ProctorU[8] rather than use a local invigilator. This service is provided in partnership with AU, but also presents an out-of-pocket expense to students. The cost of these exams is also not fixed, as costs fluctuate with the USD currency used by ProctorU. In addition to this expense, not all of AU's exams are in an online format, so this option can only apply to courses that have had their examinations digitized. Although AU is working to digitize as many exams as possible in order to align with the University's strategic plan[9], the utilization of an online invigilator still comes at a cost to the student.

In traditional brick-and-mortar institutions, the student does not bear the burden of exam fees. For the majority of AU students this is not true these exam fees are not considered to be part of tuition, so funded students cannot acquire additional funding to pay for them.

There are other Canadian post-secondary institutions aside from AU that offer distance programs in an online environment. Some of these institutions do not require their students to pay exam invigilation fees. These institutions include the University of Manitoba Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning[10] and Royal Roads University.[11]

Accessing and paying for an exam invigilator can pose a barrier or hardship to students with financial constraints. This hardship is shared among almost all AU student.

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to Athabasca University to provide at least one exam option that does not incur out-of-pocket fees for the student, regardless of the course.

POLICY 9.05

POSITION POLICY

Web Services for Students

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the need for continual development and implementation of new technology.

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University (AU) is the only fully online post-secondary institution in Canada and is known as a leader in distance education. As such the institution should always strive to be a leader in the implementation and utilization of new technology. In the past, AU has fallen behind in upgrading necessary student software. While this is currently being addressed with the upcoming Integrated Learning Environment (ILE), the institution must continue to upgrade currently used information technology for current students and ensure that such circumstances do not occur again.

As a virtual university campus, students rely on advanced information technology tools to help navigate through and complete their studies. It is imperative that the university continually upgrades and improves the student experience through new technology and software advancements. For years, students have expressed a desire to see new additions, such as video and audio content, directly within courses. Students are also interested in seeing improvements to the "myAU" portal. These continued investment opportunities will support an enriched learning environment and build the credibility and reputation of the institution as Canada's open, online university.

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate for Athabasca University to be the leader in online distance education through their presence at the frontier of the implementation of new education technologies.

POLICY 9.06

POSITION POLICY

Technology and Infrastructure

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the need for government funding for information technology (IT) at Athabasca University (AU) and for broadband internet access.

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University (AU) operates predominantly as a virtual campus and offers distance education for students across Alberta, Canada, and the world. This requires advanced information technology (IT) infrastructure in order to operate efficiently for faculty, staff, and students. As a virtual campus, it also means that the university has different capital needs compared to other post-secondary institutions. While AU does maintain some physical buildings, there is a significant need for IT capital investments to implement new software and technology.

Historically, AU has not received sufficient funding to meet its IT needs especially in relation to capital expenditures. This lack of funding significantly impacts the learning experience that students have, and needs to be addressed. As a leader in distance education, Athabasca University is in a unique position to develop, implement, and maintain leading edge information technology, if they can receive appropriate funding.

The Government of Alberta provided $184 million in 2018-19 to infrastructure projects across the province, and nearly half a billion dollars since 2015, for a wide variety of projects that ensure students have access to modern learning environments.[12] These infrastructure projects have included building and classroom modernization initiatives, new facilities, and repurposing spaces as modern learning environments among other initiatives. Yet, only $4.9 million was dedicated to Athabasca University to implement the recommendations of the Coates Report.[13]

The Government of Canada has dedicated $750 million to a Broadband Fund looking to close the technology gap in rural Canada, remote communities, and First Nations communities that struggle with broadband internet access – a major problem in Canada and among Athabasca University students.[14] While most Canadians enjoy internet access equal to or better than 50 mbps download speed less than half of rural Canadians do, which represents a major barrier for any Athabasca University student studying outside a major centre. Athabasca University prides itself on the distance education model, a model where students can study anywhere and anytime but without broadband internet access that model has a significant barrier. The problem is even more acute in First Nations communities, where only 24% of those communities have internet access.[15]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to the provincial and federal governments to provide sufficient funding for the research, development, and implementation of new information technologies and virtual education technologies at Athabasca University.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to the provincial and federal governments to develop and expand high speed internet connectivity to all Canadians regardless of geographic or financial barriers.

POLICY 9.07

POSITION POLICY

Campus Alberta Grant

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the Campus Alberta Grant

POLICY RESEARCH

The Campus Alberta Grant is essential to post-secondary institutions in Alberta and is typically dispersed based on a traditional model that does not include out-of-province learners. Although based in Alberta, Athabasca University (AU) is Canada's open, online university and most learners at the institution are out-of-province students.[16] AU is not equitably represented in the Campus Alberta Grant funding distribution because of the unique nature of the institution. The institution charges an out-of-province distance delivery program fee to these students, which is neither protected by tuition increase caps, nor provides predictable tuition rates.[17] The Government of Alberta provided $2.2 billion in Campus Alberta Grant funding in 2020-21[18] The process for reviews and changes to the formula for determining funding per post-secondary institution is not made public, but the funding ratio distributed to post-secondary institutions per full-time load equivalent clearly shows that AU receives the least amount of operating funding among universities in Alberta.[19]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union supports the adoption of equitable Alberta post-secondary institutional funding that does not disadvantage Athabasca University in per-student funding compared to other Alberta universities.

POLICY 9.12

POSITION POLICY

Course and Program Development and Maintenance

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the need for continual course and program development and review.

POLICY RESEARCH

A robust academic environment requires continual course and program review and development. New courses and programs, such as interdisciplinary cross-faculty undergraduate program credentials, will help to attract new students to Athabasca University (AU) and will provide additional value and flexibility for current students. Additionally, up-to-date course content will help to ensure that students receive the best education possible. This includes material that is relevant to students' future careers, as well as material that is inclusive, accessible, and representative of equity-seeking students. In recognition of this, the university has undergone a course and program review and has implemented program review requirements in conjunction with university resource planning. While students appreciate this work, there needs to be a continuation that ensures that courses are regularly and uniformly reviewed across all faculties, in a timely manner.

Some courses are required for programs at AU but are consistently under review when students try to enroll in them. Some of these courses are core program requirements, and they may be under revision for years. AU must develop a strategy to ensure that all courses are reviewed, especially courses that are required for a program.

AU is embarking on a course review process as part of their development of a new Integrated Learning Environment (ILE), as per the Learning Framework. When these programs and courses are reviewed, the university must ensure that there is a breadth of course and program offerings to choose from. Athabasca University should also consider the pacing of all courses and ensure they are paced appropriately for those enrolled in three credit (four months for funded students and six months for self-funded students) or six credit (eight months for funded students and 12 months for self-funded students) course contract periods. Further, AU needs to ensure that their own standards are met when it comes to course hours, ensuring that all courses that are awarded three credits remain within their standard of 45 teaching hours. AU should also look into possibilities for embedded certificates and similar opportunities as demand for such learning pathways is increasing among learners.

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate that Athabasca University maintain a wide range of courses across all faculties, including embedded certificates and similar opportunities, and that a review process be developed so that every course is regularly reviewed and updated as needed.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union calls on Athabasca University to do audits of their course content, ensuring courses that go over the 45 teaching hours to complete have the appropriate amount of credits applied to them.

POLICY 9.18

POSITION POLICY

Government Tuition Tax Credits

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding government tuition tax credits.

POLICY RESEARCH

In 2018 Alberta Advanced Education released a report, which states that "those with a post-secondary credential see significant increases in their earning potential in the long run."[20] However there exist several important financial barriers to post-secondary education in Alberta, especially for part-time Athabasca University (AU) students. For example, 83% of undergraduate program students at AU work while studying,[21] 50% of AU students are supporting dependents (which results in higher costs as compared to other students)[22], and as few as 13% of AU students access full-time student aid (with only 1.7% of AU students accessing part-time student aid.)[23] In 2015, it was reported that a Bachelor's degree graduate carried an average debt load of over $26,000. [24] Additionally, AUSU council emphasizes the importance of tuition tax credits, as these credits are often the only financial benefit available to part-time students or students who work while studying.

Between 2016 and 2020, most provinces and territories eliminated their education and/or tuition tax credits. In addition, the federal education and textbook tax credits were eliminated in 2016 in favour of increased grants for funded students, leaving the tuition tax credits for all students in place. This unrelenting erosion of the tax breaks given to students who continue to see increases in their costs of post-secondary education can place further barriers in place for students, especially non-traditional students who have less access to other student financial aid. [25]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union supports increased access to financial support for all students including part-time students, especially continued access to tuition tax credits.

POLICY 9.21

POSITION POLICY

Career Services, Co-ops, and Job Placements

POLICY INTENT

To outline AUSU's position on the career services that Athabasca University (AU) provides to students and how AU can expand on these services to better serve their students.

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University (AU) is an online institution that offers distance programs to students across Canada and the world. Unlike traditional brick-and-mortar universities, AU does not have a significant physical campus presence and does not offer traditional career services or opportunities based on a physical campus. As a result, the career services offerings at AU are minimal.[26]

There are several ways to offer career services to students.[27] These include, but are not limited to, resume writing assistance, co-op opportunities, internships, job-search assistance, research opportunities, and post-graduation employment assistance services. In addition, it remains crucial that these opportunities are accessible and inclusive to reflect the diverse demographics of AU students.

Opportunities like co-ops and internships provide valuable hands-on experience to students in their chosen field of study or area of interest.[28] Students can become immersed in their work and apply what they are learning at their institution to real-world scenarios. This type of exposure is considered valuable to future potential employers, and the student can use this experience to their advantage when seeking permanent employment. Work-integrated learning (WIL) opportunities are increasingly becoming available within virtual environments, and other technologies such as augmented and virtual reality software make access to these platforms even more accessible for AU learners.

Services like resume writing and job-search assistance (such as career fairs) offer students the chance to hone their skills and network among those in the industry while they are seeking employment. These valuable skills help students apply the knowledge acquired along their learning journeys with AU when entering the workforce.

These opportunities may be integrated into the overall learner experience. Career services can be integrated into each program with a faculty-based approach; this approach would lead to faculty-based career services rather than a one-size-fits-all model. If this model could be efficiently constructed under the implementation of AU's Imagine Strategic Plan[29], then this could help to enhance the career offerings each faculty can uniquely and individually offer their program students.

In order to help students acquire career services, the Government of Canada provides many programs[30]. AU currently participates in the Post-secondary Co-op/Internship Program through the Faculty of Health Disciplines[31], but AU should extend this into more faculties and programs. This can be taken on individually through each faculty, as mentioned previously.

The Government of Canada also offers a Student Work Placement program that offers work-integrated learning for students enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics programs (STEM).[32] Although limited to the STEM fields, this avenue should be explored as a possible source of career services to AU students.

Along with the federal government, there are other organizations that serve post-secondary institutions in developing work-integrated learning opportunities. [33] For example, Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning (CEWIL) Canada works to help provide such WIL opportunities to students from institutions like Brock University and the University of Calgary[34]. AU should explore these types of resources to see if this could fit our environment and help provide more career services to students.

Expanding upon career services is not only helpful for current students, since students also consider the institution's ability to offer these resources when deciding where to apply.

Be it resolved that Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to Athabasca University to seek out and expand on additional career services, including resume writing services, career fairs and job placement services, internships, co-ops, and work-integrating learning, with an integrated faculty-based approach.

POLICY 9.22

POSITION POLICY

Learner Resources and Cost Savings Sharing

POLICY INTENT

To outline AUSU's position on the Learner Resources and Cost Savings programs

POLICY RESEARCH

AUSU believes that our members should receive a quality education that is competitive in its use of educational technologies, course and program offerings, and student services. AUSU is also supportive of the provision of electronic materials for our members. However, AUSU remains concerned that the shift away from print textbooks does not provide adequate choice for students on what form of learner resource best suits their learning style, accessibility needs, and budget. AUSU also remains concerned of the impact on those students who are learning while incarcerated. Although admittedly AU Accessibility Services offers students a choice in materials, these accommodations can be difficult for some members to obtain as a result of systemic barriers.

AUSU has advocated for this type of choice since the beginning of this change to learner resources, in light of the high volume of member concerns and complaints. In particular, AUSU is concerned with the lack of choice in product use and sharing of cost savings with students. Many members have expressed concerns that courses using digital and print learner resources charge the same material resource fee regardless of the licence, although they do not receive the same value as they would with a standard textbook. This is because access to the digital textbook is often limited to a specific timeframe leaving the student unable to access the digital textbook at a later date.

AUSU considers *"choice"* in this case as: any option that allows students to select a traditional print-based or electronic version of a textbook (assuming the book is available in both formats), with any cost savings associated with these changes to be passed on to the student.

Cost savings can also be achieved through the use of learner resources that are less expensive than traditional textbooks, such as open educational resources (OERs) and e-texts. Any cost savings achieved through use of these types of resources should also be passed onto the student.

Be it resolved that Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to Athabasca University to always give students the choice in paper or digital format for learner resources, and that any cost savings associated with learner resources should be passed on to the student.

POLICY 9.25

POSITION POLICY

Access to Education for Indigenous Learners in Canada

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the removal of educational barriers to access that Indigenous learners experience while pursuing post-secondary education.

POLICY RESEARCH

Athabasca University's (AU) open distance model of education allows individuals to participate in post-secondary education without barriers that a traditional brick and mortar institution may pose. In particular, AU's mandate includes improving accessibility for Indigenous learners (First Nations, Métis, and Inuit) so that they may pursue and complete undergraduate or graduate studies.[35] Despite inclusion in this mandate, Indigenous learners still experience significant barriers to accessing post-secondary education in Canada. As an institution of higher learning, AU has a responsibility to remove barriers to access for Indigenous learners, as well as to help educate all learners on Indigenous issues in Canada.[36]

Of particular significance to this policy is research into the Royal Proclamation of 1763, a "document that set[s] out guidelines for European settlement of Aboriginal territories in what is now North America." Issued by King George III to claim North American territory for Britain, the Proclamation "explicitly states that Aboriginal title has existed and continues to exist, and that all land would be considered Aboriginal land until ceded by treaty."[37] It also forbids "settlers from claiming land from the Aboriginal occupants, unless it has been first bought by the Crown and then sold to the settlers. The Royal Proclamation further sets out that only the Crown can buy land from First Nations."[38] It is important to note that this Proclamation was written by British colonists without Indigenous communities' input.[39] Many "Indigenous and legal scholars recognize the Royal Proclamation as an important first step toward the recognition of existing Aboriginal rights and title, including the right to self-determination."[40] As we have seen throughout the years, these prohibitions, agreements, and treaties have not been honoured.[41]

In particular, European settler expansion continued following Confederation in 1867, often, without consultation from Indigenous communities.[42] In addition, colonial legislation, such as the Indian Act developed during the 19th century, placed emphasis on enfranchisement of Indigenous Peoples. Enfranchisement can be defined as a government-mandated "legal [assimilation] process for terminating a person's Indian status and conferring full Canadian citizenship."[43] This meant that in order for Indigenous individuals to become enfranchised, they would have to leave their home communities—which were designated as reservations through the Indian Act—and lose their First Nations status, and, in turn, access to any provisions they were owed by this Act. In particular, the Act detrimentally affected Indigenous women, who would become enfranchised if they married a non-Indigenous man. Their children would also become enfranchised. Enfranchisement also applied to Indigenous individuals who obtained a university degree, or joined the medical or legal professions until 1920.[44] This emphasis on assimilation into European settler culture, along with programs designed to

promote genocide, such as Residential Schools, the 60's Scoop, and the Millennial Scoop, worked with government policies and legislation—to eradicate Indigenous Peoples from Canada altogether.

The Indian Act has undergone many changes throughout the years. In 1969, former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced the White Paper designed to eliminate the Indian Act. This was rejected by many Indigenous communities, who believed that assimilation "into mainstream Canadian society was not the means to achieve equality."[45] The Act remains a controversial piece of legislation to this day. On one hand, it has been described as apartheid by the Assembly of First Nations and as an example of human rights abuse by Amnesty International, the United Nations, and the Canadian Human Rights Commission.[46] However, many individuals do not support its abolishment based on its historical and legal significance, as it "legally distinguishes between First Nations and other Canadians, and acknowledges that the federal government has a unique relationship with, and obligation to, First Nations."[47] As stated by Harold Cardinal, Cree writer, political leader, and lawyer, "No just society and no society with even pretensions to being just can long tolerate such a piece of legislation, but we would rather continue to live in bondage under the inequitable Indian Act than surrender our sacred rights. Any time the government wants to honour its obligations to us we are more than happy to help devise new Indian legislation."[48]

Despite a rich history prior to first contact,[49] the legacy of colonialism has worked to create disparity in Canadian society for Indigenous Peoples.[50] In particular, the intergenerational abuse, lateral violence, and systemic racism and discrimination that Indigenous Peoples face is a result of the colonization of Canada and continues to this day. For instance, the last Residential School in Canada was closed in 1996, only a single generation ago.[51] In recent times, the result of these government policies have become impossible to ignore, with growing numbers of unmarked Indigenous children's graves unearthed in many of these former Residential Schools, including those at Cowessess First Nation, Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Nation, Sioux Valley Dakota Nation, Muskowekwan First Nation, and ʔaq'am First Nation,[52] with many more in process.

The intergenerational abuse, lateral violence, and systemic racism and discrimination that Indigenous Peoples face as a product of the colonization of Canada has left a lasting impact that is experienced to this day. The last residential school in Canada was closed in 1996, only a single generation ago. The reality of the impacts of colonization takes many forms, including accessibility to post-secondary education. The barriers to accessing post-secondary can take many forms for Indigenous individuals.

These effects are also noticeable in post-secondary education. For example, Indigenous learners in Canada have lower rates of completion in the education system; only 41% of Indigenous students who live on a reserves have graduated high school (compared with 77% of the general Canadian population),[53] only 39% of Indigenous peoples from age 25–64 have obtained post-secondary education credential in Canada,[54] and only approximately 5% have achieved a university-level credential.[55] Education is one of the ways to economic success in contemporary society, so this disparity indicates an issue when considering long-term economic outcomes for Indigenous Peoples in Canada. Indigenous students may opt out of these Eurocentric-style education systems due to fear, confusion, or mistrust in institutions as a result of generations of colonial activity, but there are also a number of ongoing systemic barriers. These barriers include lack of financial resources; academic preparedness for post-secondary; absence of role models with post-secondary education; racism and discrimination on campus; transportation challenges; family health issues; institutional administrative barriers such as complex processes for admissions; and displacement from communities.[56] Often, Indigenous learners

are not culturally prepared to engage in Eurocentric educational processes and find Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the holistic sense are not acknowledged in the traditional post-secondary setting.

In addition, Two-Spirit (2S) learners may face additional barriers in the post-secondary sphere, as well as in their personal and professional lives.[57] The term Two-Spirit was introduced in 1990 by Elder Myra Laramee at the 3rd annual Native American and Canadian Aboriginal LGBT peoples gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba. It is an "umbrella term that points to the important roles that Two Spirit people held prior to colonization" and "is a direct acknowledgement of the disruption of Two Spirit teachings that took place when first contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers was made and the ongoing impact of colonization."[58]

Learners at AU may not have the same types of geographical barriers as those who attend physical campuses, but there are other barriers faced by Indigenous students that are not solved by this virtue alone. Transition activities into AU should be adequate, culturally relevant, and well supported for Indigenous learners who wish to pursue post-secondary studies but who have struggled with the transition from high school to post-secondary. Geographic barriers indeed exist for those in Northern and rural communities where Internet access may be challenging or impossible to obtain, or who need to travel for science labs, practicums, co-op placements, or other scholastic endeavors.

AU should make active strides toward Indigenizing the institution. In order to create a more Indigenized campus, Indigenous individuals should be able to provide consultation for and be present in decision-making and implementation capacities within the institution, as well as within research. Consultations should be equitably compensated. These movements toward reconciliation within the governance of the institution itself will promote the decolonization of education for Indigenous learners and help to provide education that is free of discrimination, is culturally relevant, and is holistic and integrated—the basis for Indigenous Ways of Knowing.[59] The institution should also be open to Indigenized research practices that fall outside the Eurocentric view.

These steps toward creating a better environment for Indigenous learners are not the only path we must take to close the gap in higher education amongst the Indigenous population in Canada. Financial barriers represent one of the largest obstacles to accessing education, which is a right by First Nations Peoples[60] and should not only cover the costs of tuition.[61] The Government of Canada, however, does not fund post-secondary education for every eligible First Nations individual. In fact, the Post-Secondary Student Support Program (PSSSP), which has had a 2% funding cap since 1996, is a policy-based approach to funding First Nations and Inuit individuals[62] that has a huge funding backlog. In 2008 the disparity in funding resulted in around $425 million that was required but not funded for First Nations and Inuit learners.[63] As well as this funding disparity, there currently is no robust funding program to support Métis students in pursuing post-secondary education.[64] In light of 7% tuition increases across the board in 2022,[65] Athabasca University can respond to this directly by creating grants and bursaries aimed at financially supporting Indigenous learners, who are often dealing with multiple systemic barriers to education.

Once Indigenous learners are registered at AU and part of the student community, it is important and necessary to ensure they have access to appropriate cultural community spaces. At AU, Nukskahtowin is a centre for Indigenous individuals, but it lacks access to resources from the institution to continue to grow and support the space and the learners who may seek it out.

AU utilizes the concept of reciprocity within their IMAGINE Strategic Plan in the context of Indigenous worldview.[66] The concept of reciprocity is the underlying basis of the Treaties Indigenous Peoples entered into during colonization,[67] and as an institution holding power within this colonial framework, it is integral AU is held to this standard in all of their decisions.

In certain contemporary Indigenous societies in Canada, Indigenous Elders often view education as they once did the bison.[68] This means that education is a means to survival and a gift from the Creator, and the systemic barriers to its access within a colonial framework only serve to further the socioeconomic divide Indigenous Peoples face in Canada. It is the responsibility of those who hold power in these colonial systems to create change and to begin to dismantle the colonial structures that promote this divide. In order to promote this change and implement it through positive feedback, the institution can work to increase education and awareness amongst non-Indigenous settler Canadians, who show an overall lack of understanding or knowledge of Indigenous issues in Canada.[69] To increase this knowledge and awareness in an effort to promote reconciliation, AU can implement the requirement that all students must complete a course centring on the history of Indigenous Peoples in Canada and its subsequent colonization, [70] as well as promoting Indigenous language study.

In addition to this type of education and awareness, AU should implement and educate all its learners about the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) Final Report "Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future"[71] and as well as the Calls to Actions provided in its Final Report, as it relates to the post-secondary sphere.[72] AU should also strive to implement and educate its learners on the 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which enshrines the rights that 'constitute the minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of the Indigenous Peoples of the world.'"[73]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to improve accessibility to Indigenous learners by providing more funding through grants and bursaries for Indigenous students; including more Indigenous individuals in decision-making through consultation, implementation and research in the institution; addressing geographic barriers such as lack of Internet connection to Northern, rural, and remote communities; improving the resources to Nukskahtowin, providing culturally appropriate spaces; improving decolonization efforts within the institution including the promotion of Indigenous-lead research; and implementing mandatory Indigenous study courses for program students.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to accept and implement the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action as it relates to post-secondary education, specifically to create degree programs in Aboriginal languages, to educate faculty and staff on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into curricula, and to contribute to a national research program with multi-year funding to advance understanding of reconciliation.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to accept and implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and recognize Indigenous Peoples have a right to self-determination, including but not limited to, control and access of educational systems, and to have such provided in

their own languages, and the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations, which shall be appropriately reflected in Athabasca University curricula.

POLICY 9.26

POSITION POLICY

AU Student Financial Aid Office

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) regarding the need for an improved experience for funded Athabasca University (AU) students and increased access to financial support and advice for AU students.

POLICY RESEARCH

AUSU Council believes that the experience learners receive in relation to the registration of their courses and programs is foundational to their overall experience at AU and should be consistent across all types of funding. How a student pays for their education should not impact the level of service they receive from the institution. In addition, the method by which students register for courses should also be consistent for all students.

The implementation of a new Customer Relation Management System may result in the consistency that students deserve. However, it must also be acknowledged that the difference between the course registration experience of students who utilize student financial aid for funding of their education has historically been very different from that of students who have sufficient resources to pay for their education.

Some of the issues identified through student interactions with the AUSU office encountered by individuals who use the AU Office of Student Financial Aid[74] include
- Poor and inconsistent response times when learners contact the office;
- Minimal phone support due to perceived lack of appropriate level of human resources;
- The multiple steps necessary to apply for admission, register for a program, apply for funding, and complete the Course Registration Plan, which can be prohibitive for some learners and many do not know where to turn for guidance;
- If a learner makes an error in their Course Registration Plan, it means that they cannot begin their learning and must wait up to an additional four months due to the lengthy process;
- AU's current reactive approach to advising learners in the lengthy start-up process, coupled with the long wait times for a response to requests, which results in confusion and frustration for learners and avoidable errors; and
- A lack of transparency and inconsistencies in processing times during the registration procedure, as there is little to no communication with the learner between the time the learner submits their Course Registration Plan to the time the learner is formally registered for the courses, which results in the inability to correct any errors along the way

In comparison to the learners' experience when self-funded, whereby learners have much more control over the process, the process for funded students is much more complex.

Therefore, providing all learners with the same platform for registering for courses would provide learners with greater control over this fundamental aspect of their post-secondary experience. Furthermore, additional human resources within the Office of Student Financial Aid would assist learners who require increased support throughout their funded post-secondary educational journey.

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to Athabasca University to provide students with sufficient resources from the Student Financial Aid Office.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union will advocate to Athabasca University to improve the experience of funded students registering for their courses and to improve communications between the Office of Student Financial Aid and funded AU students.

POLICY 9.27

POSITION POLICY

Co-Curricular Record

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding the need for Athabasca University (AU) to offer and track students' gainful experiences outside the digital classroom.

POLICY RESEARCH

To date, more than 80 Canadian universities and colleges have begun offering a co-curricular record to their learners.[75] A co-curricular record is a space where institutions can facilitate and track learning opportunities that are offered outside of the traditional classroom.[76] These records are an important tool students will often use to help them stand out when applying to graduate schools, for bursaries and scholarships, and to boost their resume and cover letters.[77] Furthermore, this record is important to learners who wish to obtain required skills, such as leadership, to further their current careers or improve their career prospects.

As the co-curricular record is being widely adopted by many Canadian institutions, it is important that Athabasca University (AU) remains competitive by developing their own co-curricular record. This will allow AU learners to take advantage of these additional learning experiences and not fall behind. Simply earning a degree is no longer enough to succeed. This record is a step towards AU ensuring that AU graduates have the ability to remain competitive in the job market or to gain entry into competitive graduate or other professional schools while allowing learners to explore interests outside of the virtual classroom.

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students Union will advocate to Athabasca University for the implementation of a co-curricular record to ensure that AU students have the same opportunities as other post-secondary learners and the records needed to achieve their future employment and academic goals.

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;[78]

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);[79]

h) supporting the 2020 Nukskahtowin Strategic Plan;[80]

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; [81]

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.[82]

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,[83] 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"[84] 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.[85] In particular, in Canada, there have been unprecedented disruptions in social and economic lives.[86]

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.[87]

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,[88] 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.[89] 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.[90]

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.[91] 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.[92] 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.[93] 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.[94][95]

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.

POLICY 9.29

POSITION POLICY

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

POLICY INTENT

To outline the position of AUSU regarding its commitment to advocating for and supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence as it pertains to the post-secondary learning environment, while acknowledging and supporting survivors in their personal and professional lives.

POLICY RESEARCH

As a result of the economic downturn and further exacerbated by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, there have been increasing incidents of sexual and gender-based violence on a local, provincial, national, and global level.

In particular, sexual and gender-based violence has been escalating[96] in what the UN has deemed a "shadow pandemic."[97] In many countries, resources have been diverted from domestic violence support to the COVID-19 effort, despite increased calls to domestic violence hotlines and shelters worldwide, including Canada.

For the purpose of this policy, gender-based violence and sexual-based violence are defined as follows:

Gender-Based Violence includes sexual, physical, mental, and economic harm, as well as threats of violence, coercion, and manipulation, in the public or private sphere. It can include domestic or intimate-partner violence, family violence, sexual violence and harrassment, and human trafficking.[98]

Sexual-Based Violence is a type of gender-based violence in multiple forms, encompassing sexual acts or coerced sexual acts.[99]

Often, when we speak of sexual and gender-based violence awareness as it pertains to post-secondary institutions, we refer to incidents on campus. A 2019 study by Statistics Canada revealed that 71% of Canadian students have witnessed or experienced unwanted sexualized behaviours in a post-secondary on-campus or off-campus setting, while 11% have experienced sexual assault.[100] In addition, a 2014 Statistics Canada survey revealed that 83% of sexual assault incidents are not reported to authorities.[101]

In Alberta, there are currently no standardized policies to prevent sexual and gender-based violence at universities or colleges.[102]

According to Sadiya Nazir, the former chair of the Council of Alberta Students (CAUS), "[a]cts of sexual violence are unfortunately present on every campus in Alberta."[103] A 2020 CAUS Whitepaper on Sexual Violence revealed that "[c]ampus sexual violence (CSV) robs students of an environment to safely and

confidently pursue educational endeavours and enriching experiences,"[104] with "adverse impact on their academic performance and physical and mental well-being."[105] As a result, it has called "on the Government of Alberta to better track instances of campus sexual violence, ensure institutions have robust policies and work with institutions to fund campus sexual violence services as well as programs addressing preventative measures."[106]

With its online framework, AU differs from traditional brick and mortar post-secondary institutions; many AU students do not attend classes at a physical campus location. Despite this, AU students are not exempt from sexual and gender-based violence in their daily lives—personally and professionally. Students can often face instances of sexual and gender-based violence during practicum placements, co-ops, and undergraduate research opportunities. Increased attention to these conditions have revealed a system of rape culture,[107] underscored by countless individuals coming forward as a result of the #MeToo movement, initially begun by activist Tarana Burke.[108]

When discussing solutions, it is important to take an intersectional approach, first developed by activist and scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw.[109] As a framework, intersectionality can be defined as "the complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups."[110] This means that while students of all backgrounds and socioeconomic levels may be affected, many equity-seeking communities face disproportionate rates of violence, as well as systemic barriers to resources, including the often overlapping racialized, Indigenous, 2SLGBTQIA+, immigrant, newcomer, and disability communities.

In Canada, in particular, the Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls[111] has underscored the disproportionate rates of violence faced by Indigenous women, girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, as a result of historical, as well as continued, systemic barriers to housing, education, employment, healthcare, and cultural support.

As a response to rising statistics, the Government of Canada has launched "Courage to Act: Addressing and Preventing Gender-Based Violence on Post-Secondary Campuses," a two-year project "to address and prevent gender-based violence on post-secondary campuses in Canada."[112]

However, this is not enough. As a start, AUSU supports the 2020 CAUS Whitepaper recommendations, adapted and viewed through the lens of our unique online institution.
- We support that the Government of Alberta assess and measure the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence in Alberta by developing and administering a yearly, institution-specific student survey. [113]
- We support that the Government of Alberta "should ensure that all institutions have robust sexual violence policies and procedures by creating a provincial framework in collaboration with campus sexual violence specialists, student representatives, [post-secondary institutions] PSIs, and other key stakeholders."
- We support that the Government of Alberta "should allocate consistent and adequate funding towards efforts focused specifically on training and prevention of sexual violence" within Alberta's post-secondary sphere.

- We support that the Government of Alberta "should work with individual PSIs and commit to consistent and sufficient funding for the most appropriate support services dedicated to anyone affected by . . . sexual [and gender-based] violence."
- We support that the Government of Alberta "should fund the development of online-based training that institutions can use as a baseline to educate their campus staff and faculty on effective and supportive responses to sexual violence disclosures."

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to continue to acknowledge that despite AU's online framework, students face sexual and gender-based violence in their personal and professional lives.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to continue to work toward eradicating sexual and gender-based violence on an institutional level by supporting Athabasca University's Harassment, Violence, and Sexual Violence Policy.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to continue to improve upon and expand their sexual and gender-based violence policies.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to develop policies for students in practicums, work-integrated learning, undergraduate research, and co-ops to educate students about their rights and foster a safe space for the reporting of incidents.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will continue to develop and update its Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Resource List.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University that AU staff implement culturally-sensitive, trauma-informed sexual violence policies, programming, and student supports.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will continue to work to eradicate sexual and gender-based violence on a provincial level through its work with the Council of Alberta Students (CAUS), calling on the Government of Canada, the Government of Alberta, and other provincial governments to collect more public data on sexual violence and provide more funding to combat sexual violence at post-secondary institutions.

POLICY 9.30

POSITION POLICY

Equitable Access and Inclusion for 2SLGBTQIA+ Students

POLICY INTENT

To outline AUSU's commitment to the acknowledgement of and the advocacy for the removal of overt and covert discrimination and systemic barriers faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students at Athabasca University (AU), as well as affirming and supporting learners of all gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations.

DEFINITIONS

2SLGBTQIA+ is an acronym for the umbrella term that encompasses Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, as well as all other ways individuals and communities self-identify.[114] It is important to recognize that all terms encompassed within this acronym hold different meanings for each individual.

Two-Spirit as a term was introduced by Elder Myra Laramee at the 3rd annual Native American and Canadian Aboriginal LGBT peoples gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba in 1990. In particular, Two-Spirit is an "umbrella term that points to the important roles that Two Spirit people held prior to colonization"[115] and "is a direct acknowledgement of the disruption of Two Spirit teachings that took place when first-contact between Indigenous peoples and settlers was made and the ongoing impact of colonization."[116] It is important to note that although this an "an umbrella term, specific teachings, roles, meanings, and language must come from the community." The term Two-Spirit encompasses a tradition of the First Peoples of Turtle Island and is to be used only by Indigenous Peoples. This means that the identity is specific to the Indigenous community, with all individuals and communities defining what it means to be Two-Spirit.[117] We have adopted the practice of placing 2S, referring to Two Spirit, at the beginning of the acronym, to recognize that Two-Spirit Indigenous Peoples were the first sexual and gender minorities on Turtle Island.

Transgender is an "umbrella term referring to people whose gender identities differ from the sex they were assigned at birth."[118] It can refer to "transcending beyond, existing between, or crossing over the gender spectrum. It includes but is not limited to people who identify as transgender [, . . .] non-binary[,] or gender non-conforming (gender variant or genderqueer)."[119]

Queer is an umbrella term many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community self-identify with. It is a complex term and holds different meanings for individuals, and can refer to sexual orientation and/or gender identity. While AUSU recognizes the derogatory history this term holds for many individuals, it is used to recognize the reclamation of the term by many members of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community.

Gender is a social construct used to classify a person into an identity.[120] Gender is considered social and cultural, and refers to society's idea of what it means to be a certain gender.[121]

Gender Identity is an individual's internal and individual experience of gender along the gender spectrum or outside of the gender binary, which may be the same as or different from their assigned sex at birth. These include, but are not limited to, genderqueer, non-binary, agender, man, woman, cisgender and transgender identities. An individual's gender identity is different from their sexual orientation.

Gender Expression refers to how an individual presents their gender identity.[122] Gender identity can be expressed through behaviour, outward appearance, as well as names and pronouns. In addition, "[g]ender expression and gender identity are not always, and do not have to be, congruent or matched."[123]

Sexual Orientation is used to describe emotional, sexual, or romantic attraction to other people.[124]

Asexuality refers to individuals who experience little or no sexual attraction. It is important to note that asexuality is an umbrella term and exists on a spectrum.[125]

Misgendering refers to attributing an incorrect gender identity to an individual.[126]

Deadnaming refers to using the name transgender or non-binary students were assigned at birth instead of their name.[127]

Affirming Name is a name that affirms students for who they are and wish to be known as.[128]

Use of Pronouns and Titles - Pronouns are used to refer to someone and are self-determined and not "preferred."[129] Examples of pronouns include zie/zir, they/them, she/her, he/him, as well as the inclusion of individuals who do not use pronouns and simply use their name. Examples of titles include Mrs., Ms., Mr., Mx, or no title.[130] The use and practice of sharing pronouns contributes to an inclusive and respectful atmosphere and also prevents individuals from making assumptions of an individual's gender based on gender expression or name.

Ciscentrism refers to a "system of attitudes, bias[,] and discrimination in favour of cisgender identities that marginalizes and renders invisible trans people and treats their needs and identities as less important than those of cisgender people."[131]

Discrimination refers to "not individually assessing the unique merits, capacities[,] and circumstances of a person; instead, making stereotypical assumptions based on a person's presumed traits, [and] having the impact of excluding persons, denying benefits or imposing burdens."[132]

Systemic Barriers refers to "policies, practices, or procedures that result in some people receiving unequal access or being excluded."[133]

POLICY RESEARCH

Despite the recent increased commitment to inclusivity and equitable access, post-secondary institutions remain unwelcoming and unsafe places for many students, including those of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community. In many ways, this system continues to reflect "[t]he [primacy of a ciscentric] gender binary [, which] places people into gender roles and identities."[134]

In addition, many 2SLGBTQIA+ communities face additional and intersecting forms of oppression within and outside of the post-secondary sphere, including racism, sexism, ableism, and poverty,[135] including higher rates of occupational, and sexual and gender-based violence.[136] For racialized and disabled 2SLGBTQIA+ learners, factors, such as medical inequities[137] and inequitable policing, remain a reality.[138] A recent Canadian health policy has underscored various challenges faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students, including those pertaining to mental health and wellbeing. During the policy's 12-month period, 2SLGBTQIA+ post-secondary students presented poorer outcomes across all mental health indicators, in contrast to cisgender and heterosexual students. These outcomes included higher rates of mental health diagnoses and higher rates of attempted suicide. Within this community, trans students reported higher rates of mental health challenges in contrast to cisgender students.[139] In particular, statistics in a recent survey by the University of British Columbia revealed that many Canadian trans youth often face rejection, discrimination, and violence at work—within their communities, within their families, and within health care settings, as well as within their learning environments.[140]

According to a 2019 Statistics Canada survey, approximately 47% of students at Canadian post-secondary institutions have "witnessed or experienced discrimination on the basis of gender, gender identity[,] or sexual orientation."[141] Of these students, transgender learners are considerably more likely to experience discrimination. In particular, "22% of transgender students stated that they had been insulted, mistreated, ignored or excluded because of their gender in a postsecondary setting—a considerably higher proportion than among their cisgender counterparts (6%)."[142] Of those who had discrimination based on gender identity, along with gender and sexual orientation, few obtained support about these issues at their educational institution.[143]

A 2021 survey by the University of Alberta Students' Union revealed that 85% of respondents who identify as non-binary or other gender identities and 100% of transgender students had a 50/50 chance of leaving, or had plans to probably or definitely leave Alberta.[144]

A recent "Thriving on Campus" survey from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in Ontario revealed, "that less than half of the institutions have gender inclusive housing and name-change policies." In addition, while 90% of post-secondary institutions have included sexual orientation and gender-identity in their anti-discrimination policies, "less than 50% include these identities in student codes of non-academic conduct."[145] The purpose of the survey was to collect data, as "[l]ittle is known about the experiences and wellbeing of LGBTQ2S+ university students in Canada." This first large-scale study done in Canada was in response to a recent research in the United States, which "suggests that LGBTQ2S+ students often feel unsafe and face discrimination on university campuses."[146]

This type of "discrimination creates barriers to full participation which may hinder the success of students."[147] The creation of an inclusive learning environment "requires all schools to identify and implement evidence-based strategies that ensure the safety, belonging and full participation of all members of the school community."[148] An environment that makes the post-secondary experience more welcoming, accepting, and inclusive, is believed to foster 2SLGBTQIA+ students' well-being and mental health.

Recommendations can range from "offering gender-neutral bathrooms and including gender-inclusive demographic options on institutional records and forms, [which] can encourage trans students' academic development and belonging by reducing daily stressors,'' as well as "using students' pronouns, providing inclusive housing options, enabling students the opportunity to easily change their name and gender on official and unofficial school documents, and sponsoring trans speakers." Other recommendations, including one from Memorial University's "Policy Scan of North American Universities Regarding Gender Diversity and Inclusion," includes allowing students to change their name and gender on official academic records (including after graduation) through communication with the Registrar, without requiring proof of legal change.[149] Additional recommendations include taking all reasonable steps to ensure the maintenance of school records to respect a student's privacy and confidentiality,[150] in an effort to avoid deadnaming and misgendering learners. Studies stress the importance of supporting and affirming 2SLGBQIA+ students, especially those suffering from additional stressors.[151] In particular, a 2018 study revealed that the use of a correct "name in multiple contexts affirms their gender identity and reduces mental health risks" among transgender youth.[152]

Notwithstanding AU's online framework and the fact that not all of these barriers apply to AU learners, 2SLGBTQIA+ students at AU continue to face unique challenges. In particular, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has also underscored many issues faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ students, including increased isolation, as well as deadnaming and misgendering of transgender and non-binary students in virtual classrooms. While not available in all post-secondary institutions, certain schools now allow students to update their documents without a legal name change by filling out two forms, one of which must be signed by a notary or commissioner of oaths. However, often, the onus remains on the students who are deadnamed or misgendered to ensure that documents are updated. In many cases, this may lead to names being updated in some locations, but not others. In particular, in a 2020 interview with *Xtra*, a spokesperson at AU, which has long focused on an online framework, stated "that a change should update a student's name, but due to the school's 'legacy systems', it doesn't always work."[153] Currently, AU students must submit a Student Change of Information Form from the Registrar, with a requirement of proof of current legal name, including a driver's license, passport, provincial (photo) ID, or healthcare card.[154] This can pose various challenges, including creating additional anxiety for students, increasing the possibility of being outed and being placed in unsafe situations, as well as cost, time, and complexity.[155]

Despite these challenges, change has slowly begun throughout digital worlds in the post-secondary sphere. In June 2020, Thriving on Campus co-hosted a webinar about "Knowledge Mobilization: Fostering LGBTQ2S+ Inclusion in Online Learning," which discussed "pedagogical strategies toward LGBTQ2S+ inclusion in online learning environments."[156] In addition, Halifax's Dalhousie University has implemented the first widely circulated Gender Affirmation Policy, which states that "all members of the

University community have a shared responsibility to create a living, learning, and working environment where Two Spirit, transgender, gender non-conforming, and all gender variant people may fully participate based on their gender identity and expression."[157] The University of Manitoba and the University of Alberta are opting for gender-neutral language on forms and documents, including going beyond the gender binary, and including the option to not identify/disclose gender.[158] Outside of Canada, other institutions, such as the University of Minnesota are permitting learners to use names, pronouns, and gender identity different from legal documents without having to provide documentation.[159]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to ensure the full and safe participation of 2SLGBTQIA+ learners in the post-secondary learning environment.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to ensure that inclusive and 2SLGBTQIA+ affirming language is used throughout courses, including study guides, reading materials, assignments, and exams.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to strive for gender inclusive washrooms on campuses and AU-controlled spaces.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to collaborate with the Government of Alberta, post-secondary alliances, community organizations, and 2SLGBTQIA+ researchers to develop frameworks and policies to prioritize, address, and support the needs of 2SLGBTQIA+ learners and well supporting policy change, education, and awareness.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to allocate funding to prevent health disparities and promote the wellbeing and inclusion of 2SLGBTQIA+ students in a post-secondary environment.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to include gender-inclusive terms in their official forms, documents and correspondence, including the use of pronouns, or lack thereof, as well as respecting that pronouns, or lack thereof, are simply pronouns, as opposed to "preferred pronouns."

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) and the Government of Alberta to include gender options on forms and documents outside of the binary, as well as the option to not identify/disclose gender.
Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for the ability to use affirming names, pronouns, and gender identity different from legal documents without having to provide documentation, as well as to change email addresses and Moodle logins after a name change.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to advocate for easier access to online invigilation, in case of names, pronouns, and gender identity different from legal documents without having to provide documentation.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to allow students to change their name and gender on official academic records (including after graduation) through communication with the Registrar, without requiring proof of legal change.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to take all reasonable steps to ensure the maintenance of school records to respect a student's privacy and confidentiality, in an effort to avoid deadnaming and misgendering learners.

Accessibility and Accommodations

POLICY INTENT

To outline the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) commitment for the removal of systemic barriers faced by—and affirmation and support of—disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse students, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health support— in the short-term and long-term.

POLICY RESEARCH

DEFINITIONS

Ableism is defined as "the intentional or unintentional discrimination or oppression of [disabled] individuals."[160] Specifically, ableist attitudes regard disabled individuals as inferior or "less than" those who are non-disabled. Ableism includes, but is not limited to, assumptions and generalizations, stereotypes, tropes, microaggressions, and language that is derogatory, insulting, and/or negative when speaking of disability. Ableism also includes, but is not limited to, a lack of reasonable accommodations,[161] as well as exclusion from full participation, which includes, but is not limited to, inaccessible venues and activities.

Accessibility is defined as "the design of products, devices, services, or environments"[162] for disabled individuals. Examples of accessibility include, but are not limited to, text-to-speech features, closed-captioning, accessible parking, and ramps.

Accommodations are defined as "making changes to certain rules, standards, policies, workplace cultures and physical environment." Examples of accommodations include, but are not limited to, ramps and accessible hotel accommodations and event venues, closed-captioning at online and hybrid events, inclusive team-building activities, extra time to complete tasks, and breaks.

Chronic Illness is defined as a health condition that lasts for three months or longer; many can be life-long,[163] while some can go into remission. Examples include, but are not limited to, Multiple sclerosis (MS), heart disease, as well as autoimmune diseases, such as rheumatoid arthritis (RA) and systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE).

Disability is a complex and wide-ranging term that can be defined as limitations that significantly affect an individual's life.[164] Types of disabilities include, but are not limited to, mobility, psychiatric, auditory, cognitive/developmental/intellectual, speech, environmental, and medical.[165] Disabilities can be both visible and invisible. It is important to note that not all individuals with accessibility needs identify as disabled, and disability can have differing definitions for individuals. Always defer to how individuals self-identify, including the use of identity-first language (disabled person) or person-first language (person with a disability).

Disability Justice is defined as the way in which disability cannot be separated from an individual's other intersectional identities, including, but not limited to, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and/or class. This means that the ableism faced by disabled individuals cannot be separated from the other forms of oppression that they may encounter in their daily lives, including, but not limited to, racism, homophobia, and/or transphobia.[166]

In this policy, intersectionality is applied to how disability cannot be separated from race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious/faith-based beliefs, age, size, and/or class.

In addition, in this policy, ableism cannot be separated from other forms of oppression including, but are not limited to, racism, homophobia, transphobia, faithism (discrimination based on faith, religion, and/or faith-based beliefs), sizeism (discrimination based on size), ageism (discrimination based on age), and classism (discrimination based on socio-economic class).

Intersectionality is defined as a social justice theory that recognizes "the complexity of overlapping identities, oppressions, and privileges."[167] The term, as originally developed by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw to discuss race and gender, has been expanded to include gender identity, sexual orientation, and disability.[168]

In this policy, intersectionality is applied to how disability cannot be separated from race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious/faith-based beliefs, age, size, and/or class.

Neurodiversity is defined as the different ways that individuals' brains operate.[169] In particular, neurodiversity refers to the "belief that differing neurologies are a natural part and form of human diversity," the "belief that atypical or divergent neurologies are not indicative of disease, defect, disorder, or illness," and the "philosophy that neurological difference should be celebrated and accepted as natural and normal."[170] Some examples of neurodiversity include but are not limited to, ADHD, Dyslexia, and Autism. It is important to note that not all neurodiverse individuals use these definitions, and it is best to defer to how individuals self-identify.

Oppression is defined as the "combination of prejudice and institutional power which creates a system that discriminates against some groups (often called 'target groups') and benefits other groups (often called 'dominant groups')."[171] In other words, oppression can be seen as the "[s]ystematic disenfranchisement due to actual or presumed membership in a particular group as a result of the power exercised by the analogously privileged group."[172] Some examples of forms of oppression include, but are not limited to, racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, and/or transphobia. Often, these forms of oppression overlap and intersect.

Plain Language and Plain Design refer to the strategy of ensuring that communications, including text and imagery adheres to principles of inclusivity and accessibility, including being easily understood by all AUSU Members, including Members with low vision, disabilities, low literacy, and those whose first language is not English.

In particular, the purpose of Plain Language "is to convey information easily and unambiguously."[173] This means choosing straightforward vocabulary and sentence structure and avoiding jargon, so that the message of the communication can be understood by all readers.

Plain Design refers to ensuring the accessibility of webpages and content design, including checking contrast, choosing appropriate typefaces, and using open space. In this policy, Plain Design also includes the use of alt text for images and graphics, Pascal case for hashtags (ex: ThisIsAPascalCase), and captions for videos, when possible.

Universal Design - Universal Design can be defined as "the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people."[174] With respect to education, Universal Design in learning refers to "a teaching approach that works to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminates unnecessary hurdles in the learning process."[175] This can involve "developing a flexible learning environment in which information is presented in multiple ways, students engage in learning in a variety of ways, and students are provided options when demonstrating their learning."[176]

Social Model of Disability vs. Medical Model Of Disability refers to ways of framing disability.   The Social Model frames the difficulties encountered by disabled individuals as the result of systemic barriers to participation, not their disability, as opposed to the Medical Model, which treats disability as something inherently negative and in need of curing. As a solution, the Social Model states that society needs to become more accessible through the removal of these barriers to participation.[177]

This policy applies the Social Model of Disability as its framework, as opposed to the Medical Model of Disability. The Social Model frames the difficulties encountered by disabled individuals as the result of systemic social and physical barriers to participation, not their disability, as opposed to the Medical Model, which treats disability as something inherently negative and in need of fixing, curing, or eliminating. As a solution, the Social Model states that society needs to become more accessible through the removal of these barriers to participation and calls for the end of discrimination and oppression.[178]

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Despite increased commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), in many cases the needs of disabled, chronically ill, neurodiverse, as well as members who have accessibility needs, and those who require mental health support, both in the long term and the short term, are not met. In many organizations, disability inclusion falls short.[179]

This is also seen in the post secondary sphere. Many of these learners face systemic inequities in the form of visible and invisible barriers to—and while—pursuing post-secondary education (PSE), including inadequate funding, physical inaccessibility, inadequate accommodations processes, discrimination and stereotypes, and issues with dispute resolution. In addition, many of these students are also part of historically marginalized groups[180] and face intersecting oppressions.

Disabled students often take less courses, which results in longer periods to complete their education,[181] while some may not be able to complete their degrees.[182] Disabled students "are the least likely to participate in any type of postsecondary program, especially programs at or beyond the bachelor's level. Postsecondary [disabled] graduates . . . also report significantly worse labor market outcomes compared to those without a disability across several metrics."[183]

In addition, "[y}outh with disabilities are more likely to be unemployed or not in school and more likely to be living in poverty than those without disabilities."[184] In Canada, disabled adults are unemployed at a rate of 26% compared to the average of 5%.[185]

Disability can also be incredibly expensive, including when discussing basic needs. According to the Canadian Disability Policy Alliance, the average lifetime cost (disability depending) of disability is between $100,000 and $3 million CAD per person.[186] Despite federal[187] and provincial grants,[188] tuition and cost of living continue to rise.

AUSU also acknowledges the existence of systemic barriers that prevent disabled, chronically ill, neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, from accessing PSE;[189] these issues remain of importance even when not directly affecting current members. In particular, "[s]ystemic or institutional discrimination consists of attitudes, patterns of behaviour, policies or practices that are part of the social or administrative structures of an institution or sector, and that create or perpetuate a position of relative disadvantage for students with disabilities."[190] For Indigenous learners, these barriers can begin earlier, with "lack of special education and disability supports on First Nations reserves."[191]

Be it resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to ensure the full and safe participation of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, in the post-secondary learning environment.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will ensure that a disability justice lens is applied when advocating for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, in the post-secondary learning environment. In this policy, this approach is defined as the way in which disability cannot be separated from other parts of an individual's identity, including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, religious/faith-based beliefs, age, size, and/or class.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to ensure that inclusive and disability-affirming language is used throughout courses, including study guides, reading materials, assignments, and exams.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to include a critical disability studies lens in the development of courses, as well as the development of courses relating to disability.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for the use of plain language and design principles when designing courses, as well as universal design.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for increased funding and staffing of Accessibility Services.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) for simplification of the Student Financial Aid processes.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to increase accessibility during ProctorU sessions, especially for students who use assistive technology.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to allow students to opt-in for accessibility needs to be shared directly with tutors and academic experts to relieve student burden, while also protecting privacy concerns and avoiding stigma and situations of ableism.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) to implement training for deans, faculty, course coordinators, tutors, and staff in relation to disability and accessibility.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University (AU) and the government to not require medical notes for accommodations.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University to provide increased funding for psychoeducational assessments.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to various levels of government and external stakeholders to ensure that the needs of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, are considered.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to various levels of government and external stakeholders for increased funding for disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse learners, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports, are considered.

Be it further resolved that the Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) will advocate to Athabasca University and external organizations that require AUSU event attendance, such as conferences, to ensure the full and safe participation of disabled, chronically ill, and neurodiverse AUSU Members, as well as those with accessibility needs and those requiring mental health supports. This includes, but is not limited to, accessible event spaces and disability-affirming hybrid events.

If you have any questions, concerns, feedback, or advocacy issues that you would like to be considered by AUSU council, please contact the AUSU office to be put in contact with the most appropriate representative.

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