

THE VIRTUAL UNIVERSITY

Models &
Messages

Lessons from
Case Studies

CASE UPDATES

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An evolution of an existing institution



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization



International Institute
for Educational Planning

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List of abbreviations

AU	Athabasca University
CAQAC	Campus Alberta Quality Assessment Council

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Developments since 2003

1. Athabasca University and its context

1.1 Institutional context

During 2003/04, Athabasca University (AU) continued to grow and served in excess of 29,500 students. Some 27,000 were enrolled in undergraduate courses, with an additional 2,600 registered in the university's six graduate programmes. This represents an 11 per cent year-on-year increase in students served by AU during the past five years.

The proclamation of the new Post-Secondary Learning Act in March 2004 by the Government of Alberta has prompted significant changes to the university's governance model: the university is transforming itself from a unicameral to a bicameral institution. The Academic Council now receives its authority from the government, rather than from the Governing Council; under the previous system the Governing Council had legislated responsibility for the university's academic affairs, which it in turn delegated to an Academic Council. All academic decisions (e.g. programme establishment/discontinuation and academic regulations) now fall under the legislated purview of the Academic Council rather than that of the Governing Council, though the latter still ultimately maintains full responsibility for all financial decisions. While some may regard this change as somewhat cosmetic, in that the Governing Council had previously delegated academic decision-making to its Academic Council sub-committee, symbolism can be very important to an academic culture. Vesting academic decision-making legislatively in the Academic Council is a change that the academic community had been advocating for many years.

AU nevertheless remains different from its sister institutions in Canada by virtue of the fact that the others are in fact tricameral, rather than bicameral. Unlike them, AU quite appropriately, given its national mandate, does not have a regional, community-based senate, embodied in the figure of a chancellor.

Changes in the composition of the University Governing Council also reflect the university's evolution and the fact that student fees now account for some two-thirds of the annual base operating budget. This has resulted in a significant increase in student representation on the Governing Council, from one member to three (one of whom represents graduate students). However, in order to ensure that members representing the general public remain in a majority position, the latter's constituency membership has also increased. Lastly, public membership is no longer restricted to residents of Alberta, a change that Athabasca University welcomes, given its national student profile.

1.2 International context

With some 5 per cent of its total student population residing outside Canada, AU continues to prepare for meaningful international growth by pursuing accreditation in the USA. The absence of institutional accreditation within Canada and the natural wariness of prospective, non-resident students about the credibility of unknown virtual institutions, make accreditation by an internationally recognized, peer-review agency a prerequisite for significant global expansion in the area of individualized online learning. In order to address this, AU has achieved Candidacy Status, and is in the final stages of a process that should lead to US

accreditation from the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools.

Expansion in individualized learning notwithstanding, a preferred model for international, group-based study is emerging as a result of the university's field tests of different partnerships in Asia over the last few years. The Group Study International delivery mode sees AU incorporating internationally accepted, two-year diplomas (e.g. Association of Business Executives Advanced Diploma) into its four-year Bachelor of Management degree, and working in collaboration with offshore providers in the blended, group-paced delivery of the remaining two years of study. While AU assumes primary responsibility for the curriculum, learning resources and assessment, the local partner is accountable for marketing, recruitment, academic (tutoring, instruction) and non-academic (advising, non-digital library) support services.

1.3 National context

The five-year trend that saw AU dramatically increase its student population in the Province of Ontario continued into 2003/04. Some 30 per cent of the university's students now reside in Ontario, in contrast to 39 per cent in Alberta. In fact, in the last year, the Province of Ontario enrolled almost twice as many students (1,065) in graduate programmes as the host province of Alberta (644).

National expansion remains critical to AU's ability to continue to gain economies of scale. However, a disturbing national trend is developing that jeopardizes the further development of a national market for online courses. In recently establishing its Campus Alberta Quality Assessment Council (CAQAC), the Province of Alberta was following in the footsteps of Ontario and British Columbia, each of which has its own, independent quality review process. While the mandates of these three councils are not identical (some apply to in-province public universities, others do not), all three require out-of-province providers, public and private, to seek permission for the right to operate (or indeed market themselves) as a university within that province. As permission is often granted on a programme, rather than an institutional basis, this would require AU to submit each of its more than 50 programmes for approval, at a projected institutional cost in excess of 5 million Canadian dollars (excluding personnel costs).

It remains far from clear where this will lead. The Council of Ministers of Education of Canada is seeking ways to establish reciprocal recognition by provincial quality assessment boards, but the outcome will be neither tangible nor timely. Most provinces do not even have such a board, and where they do exist they:

- are significantly different in their composition (e.g. they may be entirely or only partially appointed by government);
- operate under very different mandates (e.g. they may, or may not, apply to established public universities);
- adhere to different quality control measures.

In addition to the Council of Ministers of Education initiated collaboration in this area, provinces and territories are starting to explore bilateral or trilateral agreements. For example, in April 2004, the provinces of Alberta and British Columbia signed a Memorandum of Understanding on distance education. This states that they will improve online courses by reducing duplication of effort, and allow more information sharing between Alberta and British Columbia.

Regretfully, neither the individual forays into quality assessment boards, nor the bilateral or multilateral agreements that may ensue, really address the fundamental problem facing virtual universities in Canada: that is, the absence of a national, peer-regulated accreditation model for institutional approval and review that can provide online learners, both at home and abroad, with the assurance that they are dealing with an internationally recognized, accredited institution. In this regard, the recent initiative by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, requiring the executive heads of all institutions to sign a two-page document entitled 'Principles of institutional quality assurance in Canadian higher education' serves little purpose.

2. Organization and current programmes

2.1 Organizational structure

Since September 2003, AU has significantly revised its organizational structure by establishing an External Relations Division, by breaking up the Student Services Division and regrouping those functions that it previously brought together (with the exception of Computing Services) under an Associate Vice-President Academic, and by establishing the position of Chief Information Officer.

The creation of an External Relations Division, incorporating primarily public affairs and communications, alumni services, fundraising and scholarships, and responsibility for student union relations recognizes the increasing need for the university to diversify its funding sources.

The reorganization involving student services and their integration under the Vice-President Academic was driven by three factors:

- the desire to mainstream the responsibility for student services, given that the special attention that this portfolio had received over the last ten or so years had resulted in an imbedded acceptance of the increasingly important role that services to students must play;
- the evolution of the Vice-President Academic's role to incorporate more of the responsibilities traditionally assigned to a provost, and also to reflect the requirement that the President be more externally focused;
- a concern that the revised divisional structure not be perceived as a dramatic increase in the University's senior executive.

The reorganization of the Academic Division also involved other significant adjustments. Educational Media Development, the professional course development unit that primarily regroups course materials editors, instructional/web designers and graphic designers, was reassigned from the Vice-President Academic to the Associate Vice-President Academic, as was the unit responsible for tutorial and outreach services. Lastly, the position of Director, Arts and Sciences, with managerial responsibility for the academics in related centres, was established. This dean-like position functions as an intermediary between the Vice-President Academic and the academic centres reporting through it.

Finally, the establishment of the Chief Information Officer was seen as a critical strategic investment for the institution. Reporting directly to the president and a member of the senior executive group, the Chief Information Officer provides advice on the strategic planning and deployment of all academic and non-academic information systems, hardware and personnel.

Organizational structures must be fluid and responsive during a period when institutional and environmental change is so prevalent. Time will judge whether the major reorganization of student services and the academic division proves to be effective. Two significant gains would seem to have been achieved: on the one hand, the better integration of academic and student services; on the other hand, the reduced involvement of the Vice-President Academic in the day-to-day management and operational duties (only academic directors and associate Vice-Presidents now report directly to the Vice-President Academic). While there is little doubt that these are distinct advantages, there may well be an element of risk in the reduced institutional profile (based on reporting line) assigned to student services. The functional importance of these activities has been maintained to a certain extent, however, by adding the Associate Vice-President Academic to the senior executive group.

2.2 Current programmes

Courses

The AU business plan is premised on maintaining more or less the same number of courses, while increasing course registrations by 10 per cent per annum. This strategy is based on two facts:

- the university needs to gain greater economies of scale, and increasing the number of courses without a significant increase in new funding is not economically justifiable;
- the online environment requires much more frequent updating and revising of courses than did earlier forms of distance education.

Programmes

Primarily by reconfiguring and regrouping existing courses, the following new programmes were approved by the Academic Council in 2003/04: B.A. in environmental studies; advanced university certificate in e-commerce, and university certificates in e-commerce, financial services, marketing and environmental studies.

This past year also saw university approval of the institution's first doctoral programme, a doctor in distance education. Although the doctor in distance education is considered a very important strategic development for the university, governmental approval is tied up in the CAQAC process, resulting in an anticipated programme opening date of September 2006.

Interest in AU's programmes and their completion is further demonstrated by the fact that institutional graduation rates continue to increase dramatically. In 2003, 442 students graduated from undergraduate programmes, and 565 from master's programmes, a combined increase of 10 per cent over 2002.

Staffing

By March 2004, the total staff complement had exceeded 1,000 for the first time in the university's history (see Table 1).

Table 1 Athabasca University staffing table

	1996	2003
Academics (regular)	65	106
Academics (part-time)	31	161
Tutors (part-time)	174	258
Professionals	53	145
Management/Executive	12	17
Support/Temporary	132	262
Casuals	34	79
Total	501	1,028

Source: Athabasca University annual reports, 1996 and 2003.

Of these, 419 staff were assigned to Athabasca (including about 55 teleworking, regular academics operating out of home offices principally in the greater Edmonton region), 103 formally worked out of the Edmonton Learning Centre or the St. Albert (Greater Edmonton) Centre for Innovative Management (home to the Master of Business Administration), and 13 were assigned to southern Alberta (primarily to the Calgary Regional Centre). The year 2004 also witnessed the introduction of a voluntary teleworking policy for academics assigned to the Athabasca main campus. In exchange for a one-time, set-up payment and modest standardized annual operating allowances, academics who agreed to this policy (where attendance in Athabasca is necessitated by job requirements rather than regular scheduling) were reassigned from regular offices to shared ‘hotel’ working space on the main Athabasca campus.

3. Academic issues

As a result of the university’s recent adoption of a bi cameral governance model, the Academic Council has formed a sub-committee to review its mandate and bylaws. At the time of writing, it is expected to report its findings at which time a revised mandate and set of standing committees will be approved.

3.1 Accreditation and quality assessment

The creation of CAQAC represents another highly significant change brought about by the new Post Secondary Learning Act. The Council’s primary role is to review, and recommend to the Alberta Learning Minister, all new university-level programme proposals. Primarily intended as a way to depoliticize the process for community colleges to become degree granting, and to regulate out-of-province private providers, its implications are nevertheless far-reaching. Insofar as AU is concerned, the university (like all others) will now be obliged to submit all new degree programmes to CAQAC. Whether or not this public (yet to be appointed) body will provide added value remains to be determined, but established public providers of degree-level education are concerned that it not slow down the new degree approval process and/or introduce another political hurdle, albeit of a different nature. These fears are of particular concern to innovative, non-traditional institutions such as AU, who until

now have benefited in Alberta from a more entrepreneurial, less regulated programme approval process.

3.2 Teaching

Transformation of the undergraduate curriculum to the electronic environment has been accelerated with the awarding of a CA\$1.5 million provincial government grant that will see the top 150 undergraduate courses, in terms of registrations, online by September 2005. In effect, this will result in online courses accounting for at least 80 per cent of undergraduate course registrations by that date. All graduate courses are already online.

The university also anticipates approving the phased-in transition to a single learning management system before 2005. This consolidation is considered to be essential by the executive group, if the university is to ensure that it maximizes resource allocation and e-learning pedagogy opportunities.

4. Cooperation

The major thrusts remain unchanged, albeit that collaboration with college partners, particularly in Alberta, is gaining in importance. Increasingly, Athabasca University is seen by sister institutions as providing part of the answer to their own students' needs, and this is being translated into inter-institutional collaboration agreements. On the one hand, major community colleges, often with significant degree granting expectations of their own, consider joint degree delivery either as a means to this end, or as an end in itself. On the other hand, sister universities are for the first time interested in discussing collaborative agreements that would see Athabasca University open storefront offices on their campuses, thereby facilitating access by their students to flexible, online courses that would be accredited as part of their residential degree programmes.

5. Future development

Athabasca University today finds itself in a period of transition, brought about primarily by a change in its senior leadership resulting from the departure, in a very short period, of the President and Vice-President Academic. At the time of writing, the university was to engage in a new strategic planning process, directed by the new executive team. Of significant additional importance, is a dramatic change in the provincial government's commitment to the funding of post-secondary education, a direction to which it has assigned the highest level of importance. In contrast to the 31 per cent budget cut that Athabasca University faced between 1994 and 1997, commitments have been made to base budget increases of 6 per cent in each of the next three years, and considerable additional funding for increasing access to higher education. This change in the funding environment will inevitably affect the next strategic university plan.