

Athabasca University 

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University Research Plan

2006 – 2011

May 30, 2007

This document draws upon previous planning efforts, and is based on the recommendations that emerged in institution-wide consultations and workshops carried out in 2006 in relation to the University's Strategic Plan and previous drafts of the University Research Plan. Its specific purpose is to identify strategies which can help achieve the research activities set out in the University's Strategic Plan. It begins by grounding the University's overall research goals in the research vision and core principles that will underlie Athabasca University's research activities. It then advances seven strategic initiatives through which these goals can be achieved.

The 2006-2011 Strategic University Plan (SUP) commits Athabasca University to building new capacity as a research institution, and provides a framework for the development of a viable and purposeful research agenda. Within this framework, over the next five years Athabasca University will foster and expand its research and scholarship. At the same time, the University will continue to support provincial research goals, to reflect the priorities of national research councils, and to participate in federal government initiatives.

These commitments require the University to develop a robust and supportive culture that will effectively balance disciplinary and mission-critical research; Athabasca University will cultivate disciplinary research systematically while developing its open and distance education expertise and innovation to the fullest. Interdisciplinary approaches will continue to be encouraged, and partnerships within and outside the academy will be established.

Research Vision and Principles

Athabasca University is a research institution committed to excellence in research and scholarship. Research is integral to the University's purpose and central to its activities. To enable research to thrive, the University must cultivate and maintain a healthy, robust research culture within the institution. This effort will be built upon the following core principles:

- Athabasca University will not compromise academic freedom, and will advance it as the foundation of any prospective research undertaking.
- Athabasca University supports disciplinary research both for its own sake and as a resource for the development and revision of Athabasca University courses.
- Athabasca University encourages research activity that crosses the borders of conventional fields; interdisciplinary research helps to enlarge research contexts and paradigms, to generate new ways of thinking, to develop staff professionally, and to foster collegiality.

- Inquiry into mission-critical subject matter – i.e., the pedagogical, cognitive, technological and student support aspects of distance learning, open access and new learning technologies – is central to the fundamental purpose of Athabasca University and will remain central to its research effort.

Strategic Initiatives

In line with the research goals embedded in the Strategic Plan, the University will foster a growing, healthy research culture (SUP 3.3), increase supports to cultivate student and staff excellence in research and scholarship (SUP 3.1), and develop a clear and viable strategy to seek and allocate funding (SUP 3.7). It will enhance our international profile in research and scholarship on open and distance learning (SUP 3.2) and build research partnerships with appropriate organizations and institutions provincially, nationally and internationally (SUP 3.6). The University will provide the widest possible access to Athabasca University research (SUP 3.5) and promote the exploration and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society (SUP 3.4). Over the next five years Athabasca University will demonstrate the following key achievements: the development of new centres of excellence and endowed chairs; new collaborative research projects involving provincial, national and international colleagues; a greater emphasis on research reflected in increased numbers of publications and presentations from academic staff and students and greater numbers of grants and awards; and more student involvement in research projects (SUP 3.1.3).

Throughout, the University remains committed to the research priority areas identified in the *University Research Plan (2002-2005)*: Space Science and Astronomy; Environment and Sustainability; Globalization and Cultural Studies; Indigenous Education; Workplace and Community Education; Nursing and Health Management Research; Labour/Canadian Studies; and Open, Distance and eLearning. At the same time, the University recognizes the importance of supporting new and emerging areas of research – i.e., interdisciplinary inquiry; areas of research that have emerged since the 2002-2005 Plan; and changes resulting from new funding initiatives and evolving societal concerns.

While these goals put a clear emphasis on the expansion of research activities, they build on our past record of research accomplishments reflected in our publications and grants records and in particular the work of Athabasca University's three Canada Research Chairs and Tri-Council and externally funded scholars. However, there was also acknowledgement that as we grow in numbers of students we also need to continue to support and accelerate our capacity to do research. These research goals, then, have been identified as helping to establish a more sustainable capacity for research activities.

Besides a general increase in research activity, the University is committed to extending the number of new research chairs and centres of excellence. These are seen as providing the core funding for the development of Athabasca University's priority research areas as well as helping to seed interdisciplinary developments in keeping with new provincial and national developments. The development of research networks of

scholars is becoming the norm and receiving increased funding emphasis in grants allocations. Collaborative research projects are a mechanism that can help enhance the expertise already available at Athabasca University through research involvement with counterparts elsewhere. Of increasing importance is the development of research capacity among senior undergraduate and graduate students. By providing research opportunities for them, these students can achieve greater awareness and more expertise in aspects of research and will be better able to contribute to the development of new knowledge.

Besides these specific directions, the University is committed to supporting the work of Athabasca University researchers as part of its ongoing effort to further embed research in the culture of the institution. It will encourage and assist faculty to develop research development and funding plans which will in turn help identify the supports needed by individual researchers in their research careers. Besides the continuing integration of research into the culture of the institution, other benefits will be realized: teaching will be informed; faculty, staff and students will develop professionally by contributing to the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge; a formal and dynamic research enterprise will be evident to external stakeholders; the reputation of the University will be enhanced; and the University will establish new relationships in the wider research community.

Specific Strategies

To aid in the realization of these goals, specific strategies relating to the seven strategies identified in the University's Strategic Plan were developed. While the general direction of these initiatives is under the direction of the Associate Vice-president, Research, their realisation will depend on the actions of centres, committees, faculty and staff that make up the research infrastructure at Athabasca University.

1. Foster a growing, healthy research culture within Athabasca University. (SUP 3.3)
2. Increase supports to cultivate student and staff excellence in research and scholarship. (SUP 3.1)
3. Enhance Athabasca University's international profile in open and distance learning research and scholarship. (SUP 3.2)
4. Promote the exploration and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society. (SUP 3.4)
5. Provide the widest possible access to Athabasca University research. (SUP 3.5)
6. Build research partnerships with appropriate organizations and institutions provincially, nationally and internationally. (SUP 3.6)

7. Develop a clear and viable strategy to seek and allocate research funding. (SUP 3.7)

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 1.0

Foster a growing, healthy research culture at Athabasca University.

A 'growing' research culture is one that is deals in subject areas of strategic importance to the University, that capitalizes on existing strengths, and that nurtures research potential in latent or emerging areas of interest. It is also one that can adapt to changes in the external environment, and that lends itself to the procurement of internal and external funding. A 'healthy' research culture is one that is tied to the mission and mandate of the institution in question, that is sustainable, and that fosters a climate of internal support for and recognition of in-house and collaborative research. Athabasca University will foster such growth and health through the following priorities and activities.

Priority	Implementation Activities	Outcome
Ensure academic freedom is assured	Further establish academic freedom as a core principle of academic activity at AU.	AU commitment to academic freedom incorporated into MOU/MOA templates.
Ensure support for curiosity driven, discipline based, basic research is present and explicit	Advertise widely opportunities for institutional support of research in non-mission-critical areas. Profile and reward scholars in these areas.	New, funded work in these areas. Increased visibility for the work of these scholars inside and outside the institution.
Support and enhance research forums and networking opportunities (internally)	Encourage intra-AU collaboration among researchers. Provide more opportunities to connect with other people/organizations conducting research. Support the establishment of creative partnerships (e.g., social science/health). Support the development of SLIRP – Small and Large Institutional Research Partnerships.	Mentorship program to support collaboration with researchers in all disciplines. More interdisciplinary research proposals generated.
	Build a sense of community among students and faculty around research initiatives. Expand Lunch n' Learn and reinstate Research News.	

Support and enhance research forums, networking opportunities, and external partnerships	Organize and host national and international conferences, workshops, meetings and symposia. Increase technical support to create linking and communication between partner web sites.	Initiate process to seek and implement recommendations for such events.
Explore/recommend opportunities for tutors and students to engage in research activities	Continue discussions as to how tutors can be integrated into research opportunities. Provide Research Assistant opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students	Faculty working with tutors on research grants.
Ensure adequate consultative support for staff applying for ethics approval.	Make research ethics training available to staff. Require pre-review of ethics applications at AU prior to submission to external parties.	Workshops, online modules, FAQs developed. Increased success in ethics review for AU-generated proposals.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 2.0

Increase supports to cultivate student and staff excellence in research and scholarship.

Through its internal funding envelopes, its liaison activity with external parties, and its professional development and research leave policies, AU supports the research initiatives of its scholars. And while changes in external conditions may lead to new inducements and/or supports to pursue particular lines of inquiry, the University will maintain its consistent, general support for AU researchers in all of its subject areas, and will seek additional ways to provide the time and funding required for high-quality research to be undertaken.

Senior undergraduate and graduate students enhance the research culture of the institution as potential research assistants and contributors, and are in turn attracted by a healthy research climate and by the successes of AU staff. The University will work to maximize the potential of graduate students to work with Athabasca University researchers in high-quality research activity.

Priority	Implementation Activities	Outcome
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	Propose Centres of Excellence in eLearning and the Athabasca River Basin.	New Centres of Excellence.
Seek additional support for research initiatives in identified areas of interest.	Support/explore Northern and aboriginal research initiatives and areas of interest. Develop proposals for an endowed Chair.	Research section incorporated into Indigenous Education Plan. Endowed Chair established.
Ensure dedicated space and other resources to support research activities.	Work with the VPAdv and AVPR to identify possible funding sources and share areas of research interest. Conduct internal needs assessment and incorporate into space and budget planning.	Report with recommendations on space allocation and funding for AU research.
Establish opportunities for research skills training	Design, fund and promote internally a training program for AU researchers.	Workshops, online tutorials made available internally. Computing, video editing, and audio recording training made available internally.
Provide additional administrative support for grant applications and administration	Ensure capacity in the Research Centre for assistance and review. Organize and hold annual workshops on grant writing. Organize and hold an annual research conference/retreat. Support grant administration efficiencies across AU departments.	Proposal filed with Executive for workshops that include budget, SME facilitation and schedule for workshop.
Establish opportunities for student / faculty collaboration in research (RAs, etc.)	Encourage post-doctoral opportunities. Support student gatherings and participation in conferences to disseminate research. Provide Research Assistant opportunities.	Post-doctoral opportunities established and advertised. Centre-promoted funding designated for student conference attendance. Incorporate RA funding in Centre budget proposals.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 3.0

Enhance Athabasca University's international profile in open and distance learning research and scholarship.

Athabasca University will facilitate connections between its researchers and the international community of scholars by supporting financially and/or logistically association memberships, conference presentations, staff exchanges and electronic symposia. It will also explore the establishment of a visiting scholar program. The University will work with universities worldwide to seek funding for and create collaborative research opportunities.

Priority	Implementation Activity	Outcome
Increase international dissemination of AU research in open and distance learning.	<p>Match mission-critical research and identified 'themed' priorities with high-profile conferences.</p> <p>Encourage research dissemination through writing for publication workshops.</p>	Increased AU representation at key events.
Optimize web presence	<p>Reconfigure Research Centre web site to better meet needs of all researchers.</p> <p>Encourage ODL researchers to use collaborative web site to disseminate their work</p>	Greater research visibility.
Explore formal alliances/ memberships as appropriate (CADE, COL, ICDE, EDEN, ODLAA, etc.)	<p>Conduct review of current activity/alignment with key education and disciplinary organizations to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify areas where increased research partnerships and collaboration would be advantageous • recommend appropriate structures to support and monitor this activity • recommend 'reputable' distance learning organizations with whom AU might partner • recommend research connections with MSCHE-accredited institutions. 	Report on activity, alignment and potential partners in Athabasca University research activity.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 4.0

Promote the exploration and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society.

Athabasca University will disseminate to the greatest extent possible the results of in-house and collaborative research throughout the academic community, to governments and the wider society using a variety of strategies to reach academic and non-academic audiences. The aim will be to raise the profile of research and scholarship at Athabasca University provincially, nationally and internationally and to strengthen and make visible the links between staff research and program offerings.

Priority	Implementation Activity	Outcome
Disseminate results of AU research to academic and non-academic audiences.	Assist staff in developing research web sites, blogs and similar communications initiatives for general audiences. Provide advice sessions for faculty seeking to disseminate their work through academic publications.	Greater dissemination of Athabasca University research in the public domain.
Strengthen the link between faculty research and program offerings.	Encourage the inclusion of faculty research in course materials. Encourage the publication of information about new research findings by Athabasca University staff on the AU website.	Greater student recognition of faculty research.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 5.0

Provide the widest possible access to Athabasca University research.

As an institution committed to openness and the reduction of barriers to education, Athabasca University takes seriously its responsibility for the dissemination of new knowledge and access to information through new digital technologies. As part of this commitment, the University is committed to working for greater access through delineating the principles which define its position re open access, and working with government agencies and others to define and overcome barriers and support initiatives which make open access feasible for the general public.

Priority	Implementation Activities	Outcome
Increase support for initiatives which encourage open access	Review current open access initiatives in terms of the extent and success of open access to identify actual and likely barriers.	Encourage Athabasca University to support worthy proposals for open access initiatives.

Identify and resolve issues re public access to researchers' data directly and through the granting agencies.	Create an Open Access Task Force at AU to examine concerns around access to researcher data. Initiate dialogue with researchers, government agencies and other stakeholders on issues related to Open Access to research data. Develop an Open Access policy for the University	Open Access policy
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STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 6.0

Build research partnerships with appropriate organizations and institutions provincially, nationally and internationally. (SUP 3.6)

The Strategic University Plan (2006-2011) commits the University to increasing research partnerships and collaborations with other research institutions.¹ In addition to its current and nascent partnerships with institutions in Canada and abroad, the University will work to develop new partnerships with governments, industry, intra- and non-governmental organizations to enhance its research effort. Throughout, Athabasca University will seek to promote opportunities for knowledge mobilization and dissemination; to provide links to and for researchers outside the institution; and to augment – rather than supplant – partner efforts. An expansion of external partnerships will allow AU to contribute to, and meet its responsibilities in, the creation of communities of scholarly inquiry.

Priority	Implementation Activities	Outcome
Identify interested individuals, research initiatives and centres to promote with partner institutions as potential avenues of joint research.	Identify Centre and faculty interests in participation in external partnerships and projects. Identify current cross-institutional partnerships that exist across campus.	Inventory of existing partnerships and internal interest in new ones.
Develop collaborative research between AU staff and counterparts at other organizations (provincially, nationally and internationally)	Offer travel funding for visits to institutions doing research of interest. Fund proposals for visiting scholars who could help develop inter-institutional links	Inter-institutional proposals submitted for funding.

¹ Athabasca University Strategic University Plan (2006-2011), Strategic Objective 3.6, p. 26.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVE 7.0

Develop a clear and viable strategy to seek and allocate research funding.

The development of a growing research culture depends on having an appropriate infrastructure of support for those undertaking research and scholarly activities. Obtaining research funding is highly competitive and scholars need to have appropriate intellectual and administrative support in order to be successful. These can range from initial workshops and mentoring to internal funding opportunities to grant writing support.

Priority	Implementation Activity	Outcome
Ensure adequate internal funding for research activities.	Review current funding models in light of the university's research focus and provide improved support where appropriate	A range of internal funding awards to assist student and staff research development.
Encourage, mentor and provide incentives for staff and students to apply for and seek additional research funding.	Ensure the development of an appropriate research development assistance program for new researchers and those new to Athabasca University. Encourage all tenurable academic staff to apply for internal funding within their first year. Encourage all tenurable academic staff actively to pursue funding from major external agencies (e.g., Tri-Council bodies) annually in their first five years. Mentor individual researchers to develop not only a five-year research plan but a funding plan and assist them in obtaining appropriate funding.	Increased numbers of faculty seeking internal and external funding.

The Role of the Research Centre

Under the direction of the Associate Vice-President, Research, the Research Centre will, through this University Research Plan, work to realize the goals of the SUP.

Also under the direction of the AVPR, the Research Centre will continue to perform 'global' tasks in its support and coordination of Athabasca University research. Broadly speaking, these include:

- i) working with external partners to secure the research and publishing funding necessary to pursue scholarly projects;
- ii) tracking and reporting AU research internally and externally;
- iii) disseminating AU research to the broader academic community and the public at large;
- iv) creating mentoring opportunities for the facilitation of best practices among AU academics, professionals, tutors, and students;
- v) working with other departments to address workload and release time issues;
- vi) evaluating research proposals through the Research Ethics Board (REB) to ensure compliance with the "*Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*" (TCPS). The Research Centre will continue to provide administrative support to the REB, and for the expedited review processes that have been established.

Finally, the AVPR will develop an annual report on this University Research Plan and present it to the Athabasca University Academic Council.