

ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY
STRATEGIC RESEARCH PLAN (UPDATED 2012-2017)
SUMMARY

Major Objectives of the *Strategic Research Plan*

Athabasca University is committed to continuing to foster a robust and supportive culture that effectively balances disciplinary and mission-critical research, ensures that research is conducted and disseminated in a climate of academic freedom, and informs teaching and learning. Interdisciplinary approaches and partnerships within and beyond the academy are encouraged to enlarge research contexts and paradigms and to generate new ways of thinking.

The Athabasca University *Strategic University Plan 2011-2016* sets out three strategic research objectives. These objectives are reflected in its *Strategic Research Plan (Updated 2012-2017)*.

- Provide appropriate support for faculty, staff and student research and scholarship;
- Enhance Athabasca University's international reputation in key research disciplines, including technology enhanced online and distance education; and
- Promote and expand the transfer of research findings for the benefit of students, society and the economy.

Priority Areas for Research and Research Training

Consistent with its commitment to promoting excellence in research, Athabasca University seeks to achieve the following outcomes.

1. Encourage and deepen involvement in research university-wide.
 - 1.1 Sustain research capacity across the university.
 - 1.2 Expand research initiatives within and across faculties.
 - 1.3 Expand collaborative research activities with partners with Campus Alberta.
 - 1.4 Increase opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students to participate in research.
 - 1.5 Advance AU Press as a primary vehicle for open access publishing.
2. Build research capacity in four strategic areas: environmental sciences and studies, educational technologies and information communication technology, business change management and health disciplines.
 - 2.1 Pursue research chairs in the key research areas.
 - 2.2 Seek funding from governments, research agencies, donors and industry to sustain its research institutes and enable specific research projects.
 - 2.3 Engage with industry and other post-secondary institutions to contribute to Alberta's capacity for research and innovation in key areas such as health and technology.
 - 2.4 Foster capacity development and leadership in learning analytics research.
 - 2.5 Encourage research partnerships with industry and support innovation.
 - 2.6 Encourage broadly disseminated communication of research findings.

Renewal of both the *Strategic University Plan 2011-2016* and the *Strategic Research Plan*



(Updated 2012-2017) is in progress and is expected to be complete in early 2018. The essence of these goals will persist as Athabasca University charts its strategic future directions.

Disciplinary research is valued at Athabasca University for its own sake and as a resource for enriching students' learning. Priority disciplinary research areas include business, computing science, environment and sustainability, globalization and cultural studies, Indigenous education, nursing and health, labor and Canadian studies, space science and astronomy, and workplace and community education.

Likewise, inquiry into mission-critical subject matter (i.e., pedagogical, cognitive, technological and student support aspects of online and distance learning, open access, learning technologies, digital media studies) remains central to the mandate of Athabasca University and its teaching and research. The University also recognizes the importance of supporting new and emerging areas of research within the academy (e.g., architecture; data analytics) and research emanating from evolving societal and global concerns (e.g., equitable access to quality learning resources).

Sound research training opportunities exist for both undergraduate and graduate students and for postdoctoral fellows in the aforementioned areas of disciplinary and mission-critical research. The number of master's and doctoral programs that include a research requirement has increased over time and still others are proposed (e.g., PhD in Information Systems and in Health Disciplines; master's programs in Environmental Science, Environmental Studies, and Applied Mathematics). The research training opportunities embedded in our existing programs foster the development of highly qualified personnel. Many of our students and trainees also have substantial professional experience in their respective fields, enabling them to make a significant contribution to increasing Canada's talent pool and research infrastructure and thereby enhancing Canada's productivity and global competitiveness.

Distribution of Canada Research Chairs

The delineation of research priorities has given Athabasca University the opportunity to strategically attract and retain leading-edge researchers who are internationally recognized in their field and whose interests complement those of other researchers within the institution. Following is a breakdown of Athabasca University's allocation of Canada Research Chairs.

Area of Research Focus	Tier	Status
Health Promotion and Chronic Disease Management	2	Appointed June 2013
Community, Identity and Digital Media	2	Appointed April 2017
Environmental Sustainability	2	Nomination submitted spring 2017
Digital Disruptions and Organizational Transformation	2	Recruitment in progress
New allocation 2015/2016; area of focus still to be determined	2	Recruitment start date yet to be determined



Recruitment of research chairs, who provide intentional leadership in cultivating research excellence and in fostering high-quality skilled personnel training, is key to bolstering research capacity at Athabasca University. Fierce competition, coupled with international recruitment challenges, makes the timely recruitment of research chairs challenging. Recruitment to two Canada Research Chairs (Environmental Sustainability; Digital Disruptions and Organizational Transformations) is in progress, as is recruitment to our recently vacant NSERC/CNRL Industrial Chair. Proposed for this Chair is a focus on learning analytics and personalized learning.

Successful recruitment to these positions will allow Athabasca University to strategically leverage its Canada Research Chairs to increase research capacity and systematically create synergies within and beyond the academy, including with industry. Applications are actively being sought from internal and external candidates who are recognized internationally as leaders in their field. The work of these Chairs will complement that of our other Chairholders and researchers and will provide outstanding training opportunities for students and postdoctoral fellows who are engaged in their research programs as co-investigators, co-authors and co-presenters of the findings of their research.

The selection of foci for future research chairs will take into consideration the research priorities outlined in the renewed *Strategic University Plan* and *Strategic Research Plan* as well as emerging opportunities that have the potential to extend the research capacity of the university.

Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Development of an *Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Action Plan* is in progress and will outline the University's commitment to research excellence and to sustaining participation of individuals from the four designated groups (i.e., women, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal Peoples and members of visible minorities) in its Canada Research Chair complement. The plan is based on the premise that sound equity practices afford access to all qualified candidates, uphold the integrity of the selection, nomination and appointment process, and support research excellence and training.

The plan also provides a framework for attaining Athabasca University's Canada Research Chair program equity and diversity targets by identifying and addressing equity gaps, fostering an inclusive and supportive workplace, and measuring progress made in addressing equity gaps on an ongoing basis.

Support for Research and Research Training

Success rates of Athabasca University researchers in securing competitive, external research grants and awards have increased steadily in the past five years. In addition to external sources of funding, internal research grants are also available to support, for example, pilot projects and/or the involvement of student research assistants in faculty research projects. Additional funds are available to support the dissemination of research at national and international conferences and to defray the costs of publication in open access journals. Seed funding is also available to assist researchers to take advantage of opportunities to engage in research partnerships and collaborations that arise outside normal grant application cycles. The university is mindful of the



need to continue to assess the resource requirements of researchers and to systematically build a sustainable research enterprise that incorporates both internal and external funding sources.

The Athabasca University Research Centre provides assistance to researchers to facilitate the submission of grant applications and the financial management of awards acquired. Included among these services is financial monitoring and accounting, assistance with recruitment, hiring and remuneration of research-related personnel and the submission of required reports to research sponsors. The Research Centre also oversees the internal research ethics approval process for faculty and students and provides advice and assistance to researchers seeking ethical approval elsewhere.

Inter-institutional and Inter-sectoral Collaborations

Athabasca University encourages and supports inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaborations provincially, nationally and internationally. To date, Athabasca University researchers have engaged in initiatives with private sector partners, regional and national academic institutions, industry, and private sector partners. Some of these endeavors have involved researchers from, for example, Asia, Australia, the Commonwealth, European Union, and the United States. Athabasca University is also a participant in the multi-institutional initiatives to create high performance computing/computer grids and digital technologies in the social sciences and humanities. As a result, researchers in these fields have had the opportunity to be involved in multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary funded research.

Assessment of Outcomes

Demonstrable outcomes of the Athabasca University *Strategic Research Plan (Updated 2012-2017)* will include increases in the number of

- research chairs, including endowed research chairs, and centres of excellence;
- collaborative research and knowledge transfer endeavors involving provincial, national and international partnerships;
- research grants and awards, including national grant awards;
- sponsored research, as a percentage of provincial grants;
- students involved in research as part of their academic development; and,
- refereed publications and presentations by faculty and students.

These outcomes are consistent with those outlined in other Athabasca University planning documents, including the Athabasca University *Strategic University Plan 2011-2016* and the *Comprehensive Institutional Plan 2017-2020*.

Planning and Approval Process

The Athabasca University *Strategic Research Plan (Updated 2012-2017)*, which is in the process of renewal, draws on earlier iterations of the Plan and on other planning documents, including the *Strategic University Plan 2011-2016* and the *Comprehensive Institutional Plan 2017-2020*. Such documents are developed in collaboration and consultation with key stakeholders within and external to the university and are vetted through the university governance structures, concluding with presentation to General Faculties Council. Final approval rests with the Athabasca



University Board of Governors. A similar process will be followed in the renewal of the *Strategic University Plan and the Strategic Research Plan*.

Athabasca University is one of four comprehensive academic and research institutions in Alberta and, as such, is not directly affiliated with any other institution. It does however enter into collaboration with other institutions for select purposes such as joint program delivery, collaborative research endeavors, and academic-industrial research and development initiatives. As a result, feedback on specific planning documents, such as the *Strategic University Plan*, is actively sought from other post-secondary institutions in the province and beyond, research sponsors, and key community and industry stakeholders, among others. Upon final approval by the Board of Governors, the documents are posted on the university website and are available to the public.