



Grounding AU in Athabasca

AN OPEN LETTER TO THE ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY BOARD OF GOVERNORS AND MINISTER OF ADVANCED EDUCATION FROM THE ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY FACULTY ASSOCIATION

Our members are committed to the goals of Athabasca University and want to help it thrive. Our members are also broadly supportive of an increased AU presence in the Athabasca region. But we have been left out of conversations about decisions that will directly affect us.

We have conducted initial consultations with our members seeking constructive ways in which the priorities of the University and the Athabasca region can be balanced in a mutually beneficial manner. Further, responding to both the TRC Calls to Action and AU's Nukskahtowin plan, debates about place and belonging must also grapple with land, treaty, and relationship in the context of conciliation.

We hope these contributions will be seriously considered in place of any punitive or rigid directives.

KEY GOALS

TAKE FORCED RELOCATIONS OFF THE TABLE

Forced relocations, whether en masse or more limited in scope, would be extremely disruptive for everyone concerned. With forced relocations off the table, the chances of finding a mutually beneficial solution are greatly increased.

BACK UP WORDS WITH CONCRETE ACTIONS

While Athabasca University claims to be committed to the Athabasca region, its actions in hiring and retention of staff to this region suggests otherwise. The current crisis has many contributing factors, but this disconnect between words spoken and actions taken is certainly among them. A mutually beneficial solution will be one that includes clear and concrete actions aimed at both economic development and purposeful community-building.

MEANINGFULLY CONSULT WITH FACULTY AND STAFF

The faculty and staff of AU are deeply committed to the University and want to be more meaningfully involved in decisions that affect us. We have been denied agency and voice for too long. As key drivers of AU's policies and strategic initiatives, staff and faculty must be brought into the discussion through processes that empower us.

CONSTRUCTIVE IDEAS

There are many ways AU could meaningfully demonstrate its commitment to the region without resorting to forced relocations. The following are a sample of ideas that emerged from our own consultation with AUFA members. Some ideas may be possible to implement in the short term and with existing AU resources, while others may require longer-term and collaborative efforts.

JOBS

Reversing the trend of job loss from the community will require multifaceted and sustainable initiatives.

INVESTMENT: INCENTIVES AND SUPPORT

There is broad support for incentives that could help attract a portion of current and future faculty and staff to *voluntarily* relocate to the region. To be equitable, these incentives must be available to both potential new hires as well as current employees. The university, ideally with the support of provincial and local governments, could explore the following:

Moving bonuses: Offer moving bonuses beyond current Collective Agreement provisions for relocating within a defined geographic area.

Residence pay: Provide additional pay or allowances on an ongoing basis for employees while they reside in the region; this could be benchmarked to the federal Northern Resident Tax Deduction (Athabasca is just outside the Intermediate Zone, yet shares many of the same increased costs).

Home loans: Reinvigorate the interest-free home purchase loan program by expanding access and flexibility and recognizing increased housing costs.

Housing development: Develop partnerships and collaborate with the town of Athabasca to directly provide flexible and accessible housing support for newly relocated employees. Partnering with a First Nation to build with requirements in the contract for social benefit could also support conciliation.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: INFORMATION AND NETWORKS

Incentives need to be clearly communicated and well understood to have an impact. The University, ideally in collaboration with local organizations, could explore the following:

Hiring policies: Develop clear, consistent, and equitable hiring policies that balance a genuine effort to recruit to the area with institutional priorities and departmental needs.

Training: Provide clear and consistent support to hiring committees in accessing, understanding, and applying hiring policies in recruitment processes.



Information: Collaborate with local organizations to offer fulsome information packages, area tours, and other initiatives aimed at supporting candidates and existing employees in making informed decisions about possible relocation.

Welcome: Directly support a welcoming committee that would help newly relocated employees access services, find resources, and make connections.

Spousal hiring: Develop a robust and flexible spousal hiring program in collaboration with other local employers.

Partnerships: Develop local hiring initiatives, including internships and job training programs for high school students, immigrants, disabled people, and others.

CAMPUS VIBRANCY

Jobs are not the only way to support the Athabasca region. A vibrant and active university campus that is open and welcoming to staff, faculty, students, and visitors and serves as a common site of gatherings would significantly support the region, while also contributing to a more cohesive and collaborative university community.

INVESTMENT: ACCOMMODATIONS AND FACILITIES FOR EVENTS AND GATHERINGS

There is broad support for increasing the ability of faculty, staff, and students to gather in-person on the Athabasca campus in ways that bridge both place-based and online connections. The University, ideally in collaboration with provincial and local governments, could explore the following:

Develop accommodations: Develop housing to directly provide short-term accommodations for university staff and students (this is a key current gap, especially for students attending labs).

Use existing accommodations: Repurpose existing assets (such as the President's House) to provide either short-term accommodations or event spaces.

Support gatherings: Allow access to existing spaces (such as Nukskahtowin Centre) and repurpose existing buildings to support multiple simultaneous gatherings of various sizes and durations, including conferences and other research-focused events, team and departmental meetings, writing or strategic retreats, or intensive courses and workshops—with robust support for hybrid options. Encourage teams, unions, and other groups to access the Athabasca campus for social and team-building gatherings.

Shuttle service: Provide regular shuttles from Edmonton to Athabasca, or subsidized access to existing services, to support in-person collaboration and connections.



COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS: OPEN CAMPUS AND JOINT INITIATIVES

A campus that sees many more out-of-town visitors will lack impact if it is disconnected from the local community. Increased commitment to space and place to continue Athabasca University's commitment to conciliation—place is vital for Indigenous research and researchers. The University, ideally in collaboration with local organizations, and in response to the TRC *Calls to Action* #7, 16, 65, could explore the following:

Hybrid Convocation: Shift to a hybrid Convocation that includes both place-based and online participation.

Place-based collaboration: Develop robust pathways for researchers and local groups to connect and collaborate, including initiatives to support Indigenous-led research, Athabasca River Basin research and other environmental studies, and rural sustainability efforts.

Open campus: Open some spaces for regular use by community groups (e.g., gym, library, workshop or meeting spaces, artistic exhibits, cultural events).

More outreach: Support faculty and staff to build on the success of Science Outreach and deepen University outreach efforts by offering a broader range of topics, expertise, and formats (e.g., workshops, mentorship, collaborations), with priority emphasis on reconciliation and inclusion.

Time off for volunteer work: Provide time off for University employees to participate in local non-profit organizations and community initiatives, especially those aimed at increasing conciliation, accessibility, diversity, and equity within the region.

CONTACT

We welcome any opportunities to contribute to finding mutually beneficial solutions that centre employee agency as well as participatory, consultative decision-making processes. We can be reached at aufahq@aufa.ca.