

Athabasca University

Terms of Reference for Independent Third Party Review

Purpose

To outline the activities to be conducted by an independent third party for the Board of Governors, which will lead to the development of a sustainability plan for the institution that will focus on ensuring the long term viability of the institution within the community and Campus Alberta.

Background

The Minister has provided to the institution a set of principles to guide the deliberations and inform the development of the sustainability plan. The Minister has directed the institution to hire an independent third party to develop, in collaboration with the President, an implementable sustainability plan for approval by the Board of Governors.

The sustainability plan should:

- Be developed in collaboration with an independent third party.
- Be based on the attached principles.
- Examine and assess possible options to improve the sustainability of the institution, including but not limited to:
 - The institution's place within Campus Alberta – this involves exploring the appropriateness of the institution continuing its current capacity, and if the institution's sustainability would improve if it became primarily a teaching university with a greater focus on ensuring access for Albertans;
 - Developing a new business model – this involves examining the appropriateness of the current delivery model as an open and distance university, and exploring alternative delivery methods that would improve sustainability;
 - Partnering with another Campus Alberta Institution –this involves exploring the feasibility and implications of partnering with another institution, including examining the costs, impact on staffing and implications to students of such a partnership; and,

- Amalgamating with another entity or Campus Alberta institution – this involves exploring the feasibility and implications of the institution becoming a part of another entity, while maintaining the campus in Athabasca.
 - Note that the four options listed above are not exclusive and no potential option has been predetermined as the final outcome by government. The University is encouraged to explore any new ideas as feasible options, which are aligned with the principles, during the course of their consultation and review.
- Outline the financial and academic impacts of each potential option, identify the impact on the community, and indicate the viability of each option and its impact on the sustainability of the institution,
- Be developed in consultation with stakeholders, including the community, faculty and staff, and students; and,
- Provide sufficient analysis and information to support the recommendations made in the report.

Objectives

- To ensure the long term sustainability of institution within the community and Campus Alberta.
- Clearly articulate the value proposition that the institution provides to students and to Campus Alberta.

Actions to be undertaken during the review

- Reviewing the history of Athabasca University and such other documents and records of the institution as are deemed material to assessing its current sustainability, and delivery model including: attached principles; the Future of Alberta Digital Learning Forum Summary Report (2015); the Report of the President's Task Force on Sustainability; and the business process and educational reviews.
- Consulting with stakeholders, including: the Ministry; municipal leadership of Athabasca and other municipalities in which the university has a present or past physical presence (St. Albert, Edmonton and Calgary); Athabasca University's senior administration; governing bodies; student and employee associations or unions; and others as deemed appropriate.
- Consulting as necessary with Campus Alberta and experts in open and online learning so as to understand and articulate Athabasca University's value proposition and its capacity to execute its mission in sustainable ways and support the development and assessment of what changes may be required to its business/delivery model to ensure sustainability.

Athabasca University will provide access to all necessary information and make staff, management and the Board of Governors available to the independent third party.

Deliverables

- A signed contract with a third party by January 15, 2017.
- A stakeholder engagement Plan to be provided to the Board of Governors and Advanced Education 15 days after the third party has been retained.
- Monthly progress reports to the Board of Governors and Advanced Education starting on February 15, 2017.
- Tentative findings and recommendations will be presented to the Ministry and Board of Governors by April 1, 2017, with a final report incorporating responses to the tentative report by April 30, 2017.

Guiding principles for a sustainable Athabasca University

As directed by the Minister of Advanced Education, the following principles must be considered while the board and president address the long-term sustainability of the institution.

1. Commitment to the community – Include sustainability options that keep Athabasca University in Athabasca. This should consider Athabasca University's unique program delivery model that attracts students, including those in rural and remote communities.
2. Improving accountability – Improving board governance and accountability through a number of means, including reporting and communicating with government in ways that demonstrate openness and transparency.
3. Responsible use of taxpayer and student dollars – Sustainability should be achieved through the responsible and prudent use of financial resources currently available to the institution. Program and course delivery should satisfy a demonstrated need and demand within the Campus Alberta System.
4. Student-focused accessibility – Sustainability options must reflect government's goal of providing accessible, high-quality post-secondary education.

The next set of principles should be considered in Athabasca University's sustainability plan.

1. Government investment – As part of strategic fiscal and capital planning, the Alberta government may consider investing in capital projects that would result in a sustainable model for the university, but only if supported through a strong business case, and after considered in the overall fiscal reality and capital priorities of the province.
2. Partnering opportunities – Explore collaboration or partnership with other institutions.

Less focus should be placed on the following as part of a sustainability plan.

3. Cost reductions (staff) – Financial savings identified through staff reductions or relocations.
4. Cost reductions or insolvency (institution) – Financial savings achieved by closing, relocating or repurposing the institution.