



Athabasca
University

MIDDLE STATES COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION SELF-STUDY

February 2, 2021

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List of Acronyms

AACSB – Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

ABC – Activity-Based Costing

AAE – Alberta Advanced Education

AoL – Assurance of Learning

APPSC – Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee

AS – Accessibility Services

AU – Athabasca University

AUFA – Athabasca University Faculty Association

AUFB – Athabasca University Faculty of Business

AUGSA – Athabasca University Graduate Students' Association

AUSU – Athabasca University Students' Union

AWS – Amazon Web Services

BoG – Board of Governors

CAQC – Campus Alberta Quality Council

CARU – Comprehensive Academic and Research University

CASN – Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing

CGPSS – Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey

CLA – Centre for Learning Accreditation

CMEC – Council of Ministers of Education of Canada

CPD – Course Development and Production

CRM – Customer Relationship Management System

CUSU – Canadian University Survey Consortium

CWIKR – Centre for World Indigenous Knowledge and Research

EdD – Doctor of Education, Distance Education

EDI – Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

ETeam – Executive Team

FB – Faculty of Business

FGS – Faculty of General Studies

FHD – Faculty of Health Disciplines

FHSS – Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

FOIP – Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Regulation

FST – Faculty of Science and Technology

GFC – General Faculties Council

GOS – Graduate Outcomes Survey

GPRC – Grand Prairie Regional College

HR – Human Resources

ILE – Integrated Learning Environment

IDA – Institutional Data Analysis

IRP – Integrated Resource Plan

LMS – Learning Management System

LOA – Learning Outcomes Assessment

MBA – Master of Business Administration

MFA – Multi-Factor Authentication

MHS – Master of Health Studies

MN: Gen – Master of Nursing Generalist

MSCHE – Middle States Commission on Higher Education

MSc IS – Master of Science in Information Systems

PLAR – Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition

PLO – Program Learning Outcome

PSLA – Post-Secondary Learning Act

RAIC – Royal Architecture Institute of Canada

RAID – Research and Information Discussion

SEM – Strategic Enrollment Management

SIS – Student Information System

SRM – Student Relationship Management

UNESCO/ICDE – United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization International Council for Open and Distance Education

Steering Committee

Table 1. Steering Committee Membership

Name	Position	Role
Dr. Margaret Kierylo	Associate Vice President, Integrated Planning and Assessment	Co-Chair
Dr. Manijeh Mannani	Interim Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Co-Chair
Dr. Veronica Thompson	Former Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Former Co-Chair (April 2019–September 2020)
Dr. Jane Arscott	Professor, Centre for Social Sciences, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Working Group 1 Chair Standard I: Mission and Goals
Dr. Manijeh Mannani	Interim Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Working Group 2 Chair Standard II: Ethics and Integrity
Dr. Alain May	Associate Vice President, Student and Academic Services	Working Group 3 Chair Standard III: Design and Delivery of Student Learning Experience
Dr. Farook Al-Shamali	Academic Coordinator, Faculty of Science and Technology	Working Group 4 Chair Standard IV: Support of Student Learning Experience
Dr. Veronica Thompson	Former Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Working Group 5 Chair Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment
Dr. Margaret Kierylo	Associate Vice President, Integrated Planning and Assessment	Working Group 6: Chair Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement
Carol Lund	University Secretary	Working Group 7 Chair Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, Administration
Dr. Sami Houry	Institutional Research and Assessment Officer	Working Group 8 Chair Standard VIII: Evidence
Corinna Lewis	Administrative Assistant, Office of the Associate Vice President, Integrated Planning and Assessment	Inventory and Verification of Compliance
Emily Tamm	Executive Assistant, Office of the Deputy Provost, Academic Operations	Administrative support staff
Corinna Lewis	Administrative Assistant, Office of the Associate Vice President, Integrated Planning and Assessment	Administrative support staff

Indigenous Land Acknowledgement

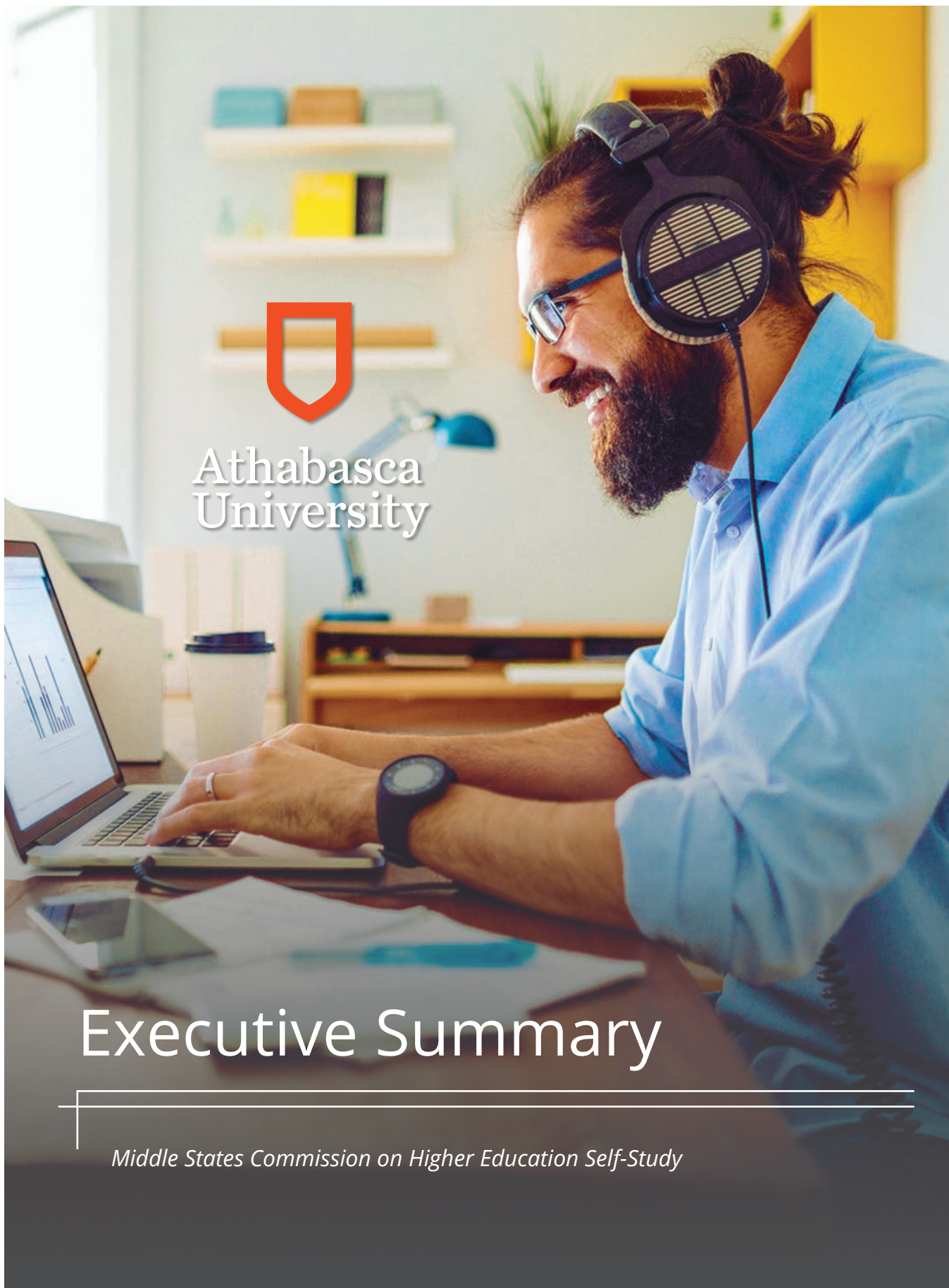
Athabasca University respectfully acknowledges that we are on and work on the traditional lands of the Indigenous Peoples (Inuit, First Nations, Métis) of Canada. We honour the ancestry, heritage and gifts of the Indigenous Peoples and give thanks to them.



Athabasca
University

Executive Summary

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study



Executive Summary

This Self-Study is presented to the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) as the fruit of a nearly two-year process of reflection by a broad and diverse group. Faculty, staff, and administrators were charged with examining all of the University's functions through the Standards established by the MSCHE. Each standard is discussed in detail to illustrate Athabasca University's compliance with both the Standards and the Requirements of Affiliation particular to each of them. Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation, when identified, are articulated at the conclusion of each Standard.

In accordance with the Commission's Substantive Change Policy and Procedures, Athabasca University (AU) has no substantive changes to report since 2018. Substantive Change Requests will be filed in the next 18 months as the University implements transformative change initiatives outlined throughout the Self-Study.

In 2018, Athabasca University began an academic and administrative transformation guided by the *IMAGINE* (ES.0.01) plan, through which University will more efficiently deliver on its core mission to transform lives and communities. As Canada's online university, we are building the digital learning institution for the future. Athabasca University's primary focus is on the Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) program (ES.0.04). This is a very exciting time for AU, as we build the learning environment of the future, providing learners with an engaging and immersive experience unlike any other in Canada. In fact, this is the first project of its kind among post-secondary institutions in Canada.

By working with industry-leading experts D2L and Ellucian to innovate and improve the learner experience, our integrated learning environment will be one of the most sophisticated in the post-secondary online space. It will bring together all aspects of online learning as a seamless whole, including the management of learning, data records, academic and financial services, credentialing, and learner support. Achieving our vision of this new learner experience will not be possible without our people. Ensuring our team members have the digital skills required to steward our Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) is critical

and so this program also represents a significant investment by AU in training and developing the skills of our team. To this end, AU announced thirteen transformation initiatives (ES.0.07) in January 2020. The adaptations we are making to our environment are outlined in further detail in this Self-Study.

Athabasca University gratefully acknowledges MSCHE's guidance and assistance in the transformative processes that have improved the University's financial sustainability, enhanced a mission-centric focus and strategically aligned goals, and enabled AU to concentrate its administrative efforts on institutional effectiveness.

Through the MSCHE processes of Self-Study, periodic review, and monitoring reports, AU has directed its efforts to rigorous on-going self-assessment as the primary indicator of the extent and depth of the University's transformation. Athabasca University thanks MSCHE's staff and is grateful for the Self-Study process for assisting AU in this important work.

Highlights of the Analysis and Recommendations

Standard I: Mission and Goals

AU meets Standard I by fulfilling its Mission and Goals. The University's mission-centric focus is embedded in the strategic plan, *IMAGINE: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities* (ES.0.01). Foundational Plans (ES.0.02) – academic, operational, and administrative – elaborate a

multi-year planning process and inform unit-level annual operational plans. Foundational plans are assessed and updated on an ongoing basis through integrated planning.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Support AU's transformation, most notably the OneAU Service Model changes ([ES.0.07](#)), reconfigurations, reorganizations, reviews, and engagements through effective planning, communication, and risk management for the entire change process.

Standard II: Ethics and Integrity

AU meets Standard II through commitment to ethics and integrity in the areas of academic freedom and integrity, diversity, the effective management of grievances, avoidance of conflicts of interest, fairness and impartiality for its employees, affordability and informed decision-making, compliance, and transparency.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Continue to contribute to the decolonization of the academy in ways recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in its Calls to Action.
2. Actualize Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles expressed in AU's EDI Framework.
3. Decrease manual interventions and create guidelines and criteria in relation to performance measures to enhance the annual performance assessment process. Areas for innovation and improvement in relation to the employee life cycle include the opportunity to expand, expedite, and digitize the on-boarding experience and off-boarding process.

Standard III: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience

AU demonstrates compliance with Standard III through rigorous degree approval processes and course development policy and practice. AU's academic programs ([ES.0.03](#)) are designed to foster a coherent student learning experience that promotes the synthesis of learning.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Implement the planned transformation in the Student Learning Experience ([ES.0.07](#)). AU's new Integrated Learning Environment ([ES.0.04](#))

will enable technology-based tools to facilitate proactive student support in a personal and scalable way, connecting learners to the support they need as they need it.

2. Leverage technology to create access, enhance open and distributed learning environments, and build collaborative and coordinated environments and networks to achieve coherence in the student learning experience and the synthesis of learning. The *IMAGINE* plan does not see a separation between education and the rest of a learner's life; rather, it views learners as life-long learners whose engagement with Athabasca University does not end with the completion of a course or a credential.
3. Provide graduate learners with increased research collaboration opportunities, support in research ethics processes, and increased support for research dissemination.

Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience

Students are at the center of AU's mission and priorities. From tutor and academic expert support to accessibility and mental health services, AU works to reach and support all learners. Over the past year, the University has made changes to its administrative structures and student services with the purpose of improving the student experience. These changes reflect the strategic directions and priority outcomes in AU's *IMAGINE* plan. Additional changes are expected with the implementation of OneAU Transformation ([ES.0.07](#)) projects.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Establish and refine processes to ensure learners benefit from more robust and accessible financial supports from AU, including improved advice on the availability of financial supports in the form of scholarships, bursaries, grants, and research assistantships ([ES.0.05](#)).
2. AU has the opportunity to improve Transfer Credit and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition technologies. Reducing time required for the Transfer Credit and the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition processes would further improve student experience.

Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment

AU's mission statement and strategic plan emphasize the importance of student learning. It is through the assessment of student learning and achievement that the University is able to demonstrate that students have accomplished educational goals consistent with their program of study, their degree level, and the institution's mission, and have also met the appropriate expectations of institutions of higher learning. Most academic programs go through program assessments annually. In addition, they either undergo academic program reviews every five years or undertake systematic evaluations of their curricula as part of their professional accreditation self-studies.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Design an institution-wide Learning Outcomes Assessment infrastructure that supports the emerging Integrated Learning Environment.

Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement

AU has made significant efforts to improve its financial strength. The University is committed to careful stewardship of all resources facilitated by an integrated resource planning process grounded in the Mission and *IMAGINE* Plan. The most recent efforts at AU have seen the expansion of assessment to administrative areas that support the overall goals of the University.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Improve institutional effectiveness structures and assessment practices by implementing an institutional-level assessment process.

Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, and Administration

AU has gone through significant changes in leadership, and established strong, strategic directions related to governance, leadership, and administration, aiming to provide our students superior support in their educational journey. These changes include the appointment of a new President in 2016, a new Provost in 2017, and the recruitment of vice presidents to establish a strong and capable executive team. With a strong direction in place, the Board of Governors has commenced the recruitment for a new President

with an expected start date to be determined. The University's commitment to innovation, growth and – most critically – to student support and success as articulated in *IMAGINE* are central to the University's future. AU is committed to ensuring that its mandate and goals are articulated clearly in strategic plans and frameworks to support the governing bodies in sound and effective decision-making.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Ensure that faculty, staff, and students understand the governance and decision-making structures of the University so that they can make their voices heard within the decision-making processes.

AU's Response to COVID-19

Athabasca University acknowledges and recognizes the outstanding work and dedication of faculty and staff as they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. The University implemented the following changes.

Standard II: Ethics and Integrity

Athabasca University has been regularly communicating to its learners, faculty, and staff the measures the University has put in place for their safety and the safety of others. These measures encompass all locations in Alberta where faculty and staff work and invigilation centres provincially, nationally, and internationally.

Athabasca University has put in place protocols for physically accessing University buildings on both a short-term and long-term basis. Since March 2020, most faculty and staff have been working from home.

Standard III: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience

AU has a small number of courses which are offered face-to-face. These courses were pivoted to virtual delivery (i.e., five courses in the Faculty of Health Disciplines). In-person labs in the Faculty of Science and Technology were replaced with simulations, data, and theory.

Faculty and staff continue to engage in professional development opportunities offered virtually (i.e. online conferences, learning activities, and webinars).

The Faculty of Health Disciplines halted all clinical practicums in March 2020. Practicums recommenced in September 2020. Upon recommencement, the Faculty instituted more flexibility in its practicum offerings. Practicum courses have been changed in the Master of Nursing: Nurse Practitioner program from five theory and practicum-integrated courses to three stand-alone practicums. In addition, the practicum course in the Master of Counselling program has changed from one six-month course to two three-month courses.

Similar arrangements have been put in place for courses with practicum requirements in the Heritage Resources Management program in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience

As noted above, Athabasca University staff, including student support services, transitioned to home offices in March 2020. Through that transition, AU was able to keep all services to learners available, except for phone lines. Phone lines were reinstated in December 2020; we anticipate improvements to service ([ES.0.06](#)).

A large number of students have been affected by the pandemic. As a result, the University has waived fees, approved extensions, and arranged for alternative examinations. Faculty and staff have also addressed a large number of urgent requests from students requiring accommodations. Highlights of these accommodations are provided below. The University:

- Added expert advice on mental health matters to the institutional COVID-19 communications to ensure that learners are well supported.
- Developed an integrated approach to COVID-19 Frequently Asked Questions and learner communications.
- Implemented a course restart process to support frontline working learners, allowing them to pause their studies when needed.
- Processed over 11,000 free course extensions for learners, avoiding rush course withdrawals.
- Moved 158 print textbooks to digital format as part of Learning Resource Resiliency Project.
- Switched from paper to electronic processes for receiving and issuing transcripts.
- Fast-tracked graduation processes to ensure nursing graduates could join the workforce immediately; the processes included switching to an electronic graduation letter process.

- Established AU's first Emergency Bursary Scheme. The University worked with its student associations to establish the program; 134 bursaries, each of \$1000 value, were distributed, serving about 25% of the students in need.

Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment

Athabasca University moved all existing paper exams to the ProctorU online environment and provided students, who have been unable to take their exams virtually, alternative methods of assessing the learning outcomes in courses. This required the deployment and retraining of team members to support increased digital exam activities. Faculty were also provided guidelines on alternative assessment. Compared to a few months ago, an additional 5,000 learners can now take an online exam.

In addition to alternative examinations, including reflective forms of assessment, the University is looking into the future to imagine new and flexible assessment approaches which provide proper demonstration of competency, while maintaining academic integrity.

Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, and Administration

Due to the immediate impact of COVID-19, AU's IT division rapidly shifted many previously office-based operations to home-based operations. Over 180 staff across Alberta needed to have their office desktops replaced with laptops. To this end, new operating systems were installed, and users were set up with Amazon WorkSpaces. Within a few days, most staff were working remotely.

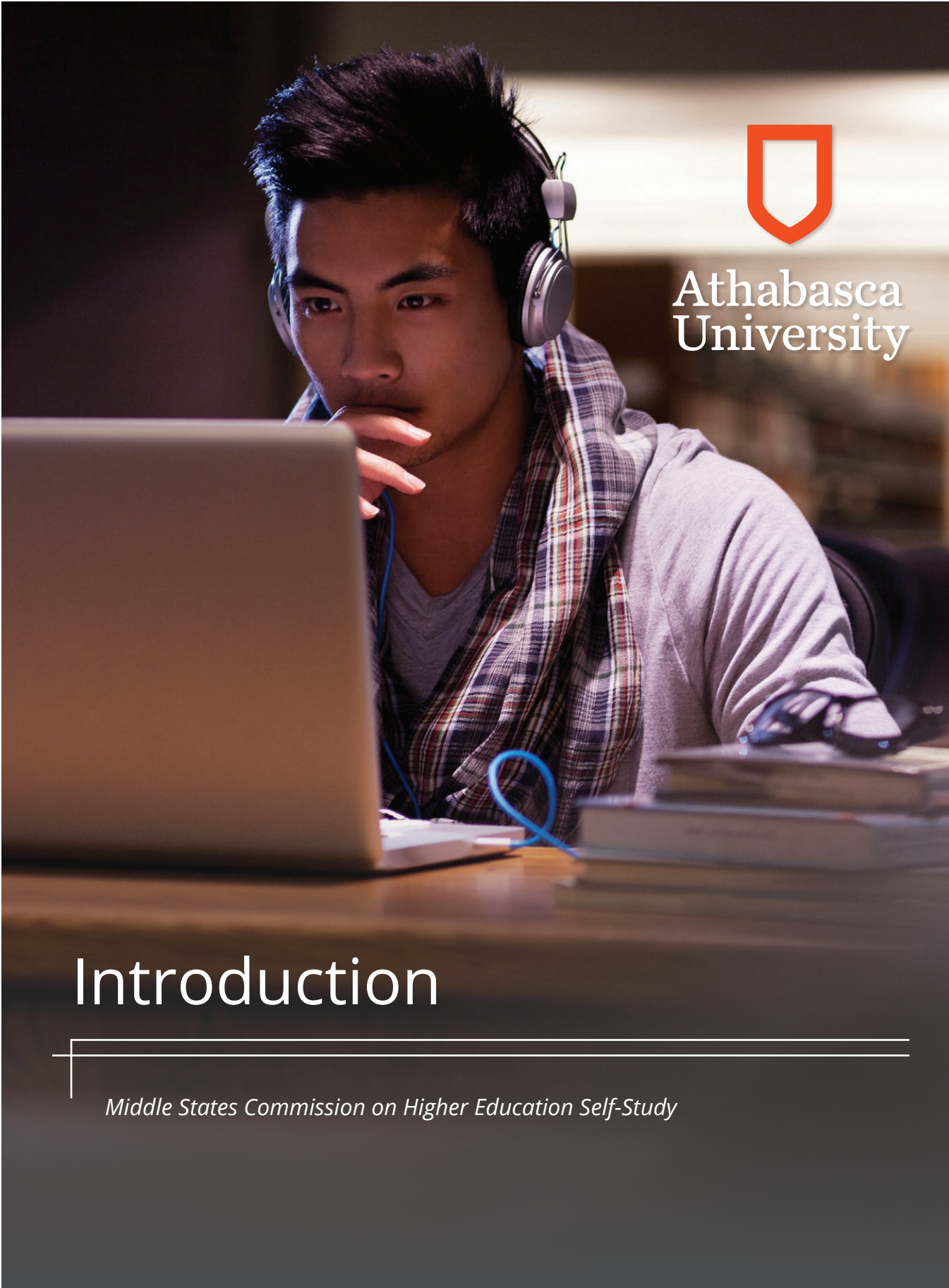
The next phase focused on additional security for remote working staff. Working with Apple, AU created a plan to deliver iPhones pre-loaded with relevant AU applications to all AU faculty and staff, thus ensuring multi factor authentication (MFA) for each staff member. Since AU is providing the data plan for these devices, this initiative mitigated the risks many remote- and rural-based faculty and staff faced with reliable internet connectivity at home. This initiative supports digital security and allows staff to follow secure practices for their cellphones, computers, digital accounts, and network devices at home.

These current initiatives will also serve a broader vision over a longer range to support AU's plans to transition to a near-virtual organizational structure

by December 2021. The roll out plan for the initiative is as follows:

- a. A critical focus on AU's continued monitoring of Health guidelines on COVID-19 and effective responses to the guidelines.
- b. Development and implementation of a OneAU Telework Policy and associated telework program.
- c. Full transition to a near-virtual organization.

In order to facilitate the necessary consultation and collaboration required to transition efficiently to a near-virtual organization with full consideration of AU's strategic, academic and research goals, the decision was made to convene a Near-Virtual Working Group reporting to the Administrative Council. The Near-Virtual Working Group will be composed of team members representing all faculties and operational units and levels across AU.



Athabasca
University

Introduction

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Introduction

Athabasca University Overview and Context

[Athabasca University \(AU\)](#) is a public, board-governed, open and online University, operating as a Comprehensive Academic and Research University (CARU) under authority of the Alberta Post-Secondary Learning Act. As a partner within the Alberta post-secondary system, AU works with key stakeholders to ensure a seamless and responsive advanced education system that provides and supports high-quality lifelong learning opportunities for residents of Alberta and beyond. With over 1,000 faculty and staff serving over 42,000 students in every province and territory of Canada and 73 countries, AU offers 978 courses in 57 undergraduate and graduate programs in a range of arts, sciences, and professional disciplines ([INTRO.0.08](#)).

As a CARU, AU is home to four Canada Research Chairs and two Campus Alberta Innovation Program Chairs. The University also hosts a Chair for the Commonwealth of Learning and the Chair for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization International Council for Open and Distance Education (UNESCO/ICDE) in Open Educational Resources, one of the only two in the world.

As Canada's open university, AU is devoted to the removal of barriers to post-secondary education, providing access to learners regardless of age, gender, educational background, disability, career and family obligations, culture, or geographic location. AU has a long-standing practice of working collaboratively with other Canadian and international post-secondary institutions and industry and, in 2006, became the first Canadian public university accredited in the United States through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). Through formal collaborative agreements between AU and other post-secondary institutions, professional associations, and corporate bodies, students and professionals make extensive use of AU courses and educational services to advance their education and/or careers.

Since its inception in 1970, Athabasca University has stood at the cutting edge of educational innovation. As an open and online university, we

offer flexible enrolment opportunities for lifelong learners who cannot or choose not to undertake their post-secondary learning at traditional, on-site institutions. AU students interact online with fellow learners across Canada and around the world. AU continues to develop online courses and programs in established and emerging areas to create knowledge, develop research expertise, meet the needs of career professionals, and foster academic excellence and respect for diverse world views in its graduates and students.

In 2018, AU introduced its new strategic plan: *IMAGINE: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities* ([INTRO.0.01](#)). In *IMAGINE*, AU sets out a leading-edge, best-in-class vision for a digital-first university. The Plan lays the foundation for a university that recognizes and celebrates the diversity and richness of its online community. It recognizes that learners come to AU with personal learning goals that arise from their unique backgrounds and experiences, and pledges to provide a seamless and intuitive experience as online learners pursue their unique learning journeys. *IMAGINE* also reflects AU's commitment to creating and supporting a growth culture that celebrates success, superior performance, innovation, action, and persistence toward AU's vision.

Following the introduction of *IMAGINE*, AU completed an inclusive university-wide development process leading to the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* ([INTRO.0.03](#)). The Framework articulates AU's vision for how it will once again transform the learner experience by setting a direction in higher education that benefits its learners and those studying at other institutions and in other postsecondary systems.

Our Vision

Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities.

Our Mission

Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, is dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level study and to increasing equality of educational opportunities for adult learners worldwide.

Institutional Goals

AU's *IMAGINE* plan builds upon the strength and spirit of its entire AU community.

The AU community is focused on:

- Moving Beyond Open: Bridging Open and Inclusion
- Moving Beyond Place: Transforming Communities through Belonging and Relationships
- Moving Beyond the Norm: Adopting Innovative Ideas and Taking Calculated Risks
- Moving Beyond the Now: Making Change through Agility and Adaptability

These broad goals inform the University's strategic directions and priority outcomes for 2019 through 2023.

Making Progress on *IMAGINE*

AU continues to make progress on the *IMAGINE* plan with significant milestones expressed throughout this Self-Study. The University keeps the plan updated with progress against the priority outcomes.

The *IMAGINE* plan is AU's roadmap to success. As part of integrated planning, the University also completed a series of Foundational Plans ([INTRO.0.04](#)), which provide more focused direction to the University community on selected aspects of the broad strategic directions articulated in *IMAGINE*.

Self-Study Objectives

Athabasca University's institutional priorities to be addressed in the Self-Study are as follows:

1. Strengthen ongoing institutional effectiveness;
2. Realize a reimagined integrated student learning environment in alignment with AU's Learning Framework;
3. Promote academic excellence and innovation through research; and
4. Strengthen university culture and community engagement.

Alignment of Selected Priorities with AU's Mission and Goals

Table 2. Alignment of AU Mission with Institutional Priorities

Institutional Priorities				
Athabasca University is a public institution that fosters:	Strengthen Ongoing Institutional Effectiveness	Realize a Re-imagined Integrated Learning Environment	Promote Academic Excellence and Innovation through Research	Strengthen University Culture and Community Engagement
Beyond Open Teaching and Learning Success	✓	✓		
Beyond Now Teaching and Learning Success	✓	✓	✓	
Beyond Norm Teaching and Learning Success	✓	✓	✓	
Beyond Place Teaching and Learning Success		✓		
Beyond Open AU Success		✓		✓
Beyond Now AU Success	✓			✓
Beyond Norm AU Success	✓	✓		✓
Beyond Place AU Success		✓		✓
Beyond Open Research and Development Success		✓	✓	
Beyond Now Research and Development Success			✓	
Beyond Norm Research and Development Success			✓	
Beyond Place Research and Development Success			✓	

Alignment of Selected Priorities with MSCHE Standards

Table 3. Alignment of MSCHE Standards and Institutional Priorities

Institutional Priorities				
	Strengthen Ongoing Institutional Effectiveness	Realize a Re-imagined Integrated Learning Environment	Promote Academic Excellence and Innovation through Research	Strengthen University Culture and Community Engagement
Standard I: Mission and Goals	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standard II: Ethics and Integrity	✓			✓
Standard III: Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience	✓	✓	✓	✓
Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment	✓	✓		
Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement	✓			✓
Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, and Administration	✓			✓

Selected Priorities – Rationale

1) Strengthen Ongoing Institutional Effectiveness

AU is undertaking an integrated planning, assessment, and accountability cycle. Integrated planning supports strategic decision-making by providing a comprehensive view of resources and commitments to ensure the alignment of financial and capital resources with AU's priorities. We are seeing increased system-based coordination, collaboration, cooperation, and communication in our projects and activities. We recognize the need to accelerate and strengthen a culture of institutional effectiveness in several areas, including evaluation and assessment, student services, and teaching and learning. In this regard, AU announced thirteen transformation initiatives in January 2020 ([INTRO.0.07](#)). The adaptations we are making to our environment are outlined in further detail in this Self-Study. The Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation of the MSCHE are rigorous and comprehensive, and the Self-Study will strengthen our institution by supporting an overall culture of continuous improvement. This priority contributes to all MSCHE Standards.

2) Realize a Re-imagined Integrated Learning Environment in Alignment with AU's Learning Framework

Following the approval of *IMAGINE* ([INTRO.0.01](#)), AU completed an inclusive university-wide development process by approving the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* ([INTRO.0.05](#)). Implementation of the Framework is contributing to the realization of Teaching and Learning Success and Research and Development Success – integral to the successful realization of AU's *IMAGINE* plan.

An Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) will enable AU's continued transition to a digital-first learning environment. Anticipated in 2022, the ILE will combine a Learning Management System (LMS), Student Information System (SIS), and a Student/Customer Relationship Management System (SRM or CRM) into a seamlessly integrated system designed to support learners throughout their learning journeys (see Standard III for additional information).

This priority contributes to MSCHE Standards I, III, IV, and V as the Learning Framework provides the overall strategic direction for faculty-level and unit-level decisions about how to design, deliver,

support, assess, and continuously improve all aspects of the learning experience. Implementation of the Framework requires engagement from the entire AU community—and indeed, one can see significant activity in support of the Framework already underway in the Faculties and in other units.

3) Promote Academic Excellence and Innovation through Research

The Strategic Research Plan (2018–2022) ([INTRO.0.06](#)) follows from the *IMAGINE* plan. AU is committed to open scholarship, which encompasses open science, open access, open data, open education, and all other forms of openness in the scholarly and research environment. The institution is also transforming knowledge creation and dissemination.

AU's *Strategic Research Plan* will enhance and enable a vibrant research culture. *Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities* affords myriad disciplinary and multidisciplinary opportunities to address questions of local, national, and global concern related to the University's four strategic directions. Realizing the plan will contribute to Standards I, III, and IV.

4) Strengthen University Culture and Community Engagement

Through the collective efforts of the entire AU community, we are able to transform lives and transform communities. We provide an environment in which learners can harness the power of higher education so that they and their communities can realize their fullest potential. Moreover, we recognize that equipping AU to realize its vision and fulfil its mission starts with our people and must include every member of our team. Because of our unique, diverse, and dispersed workforce, we must create an environment that assures individual enrichment and individual and organizational success. Therefore, there is special focus on talent management, human resources service delivery and governance, communication, and human resources transformation. Realizing this priority will contribute to Standards I, II, III, IV, VI, and VII.

Intended Outcomes of the Self-Study

This Self-Study will allow AU to:

- Reaffirm that it meets the Standards for Accreditation and Requirements of Affiliation of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education;
- Strengthen the culture of student learning assessment and better integrate effectiveness measures into the integrated planning process; and
- Contribute to the expansion and generation of new learning opportunities in current and emerging academic fields.

We commit to meeting these outcomes at the end of the Self-Study process.



Athabasca
University

Standard I: Mission and Goals

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study



Standard I: Mission and Goals

The institution's mission defines its purpose within the context of higher education, the students it serves, and what it intends to accomplish. The institution's stated goals are clearly linked to its mission and specify how the institution fulfills its mission.

OVERVIEW

A full description and illustration of the ways Athabasca University meets the four criteria and all applicable sub-criteria of Standard I, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 7 and 10, are presented throughout this Standard.

Criterion 1. Athabasca University has clearly defined mission and goals.

AU's Mission Statement has been stable since its inception in 1985 (Mission Statement and Long-Term Plan, p. 1 ([I.C1.01](#))), and has been periodically reaffirmed (Strategic University Plan, 2002-2006, p.5 ([I.C1.02](#)), 2004 Self Study, p. I ([I.C1.03](#)), 2010 Self Study, p. 11 ([I.C1.04](#))), most recently in 2017.

Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, is dedicated to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level study and to increasing equality of educational opportunities for adult learners worldwide (GFC Special Meeting 42, Nov. 14, 2017 ([I.C1.05](#)) and the Board Meeting 230, Dec. 15, 2017 ([I.C1.06](#)), IMAGINE ([I.C1.13](#)))

The Mission of Athabasca University is further elaborated in a Mandate Statement. Input on the Mandate Statement was provided by various governance bodies, including General Faculties Council (GFC) before approval by the Board of Governors (BoG) on December 14, 2018, ([I.C1.07](#) and [I.C1.08](#)). The AU Mandate has been submitted to the Ministry for approval.

Our Mandate

Committed to open access and digitally-enabled lifelong learning, Athabasca University (c.1970) is Canada's only public and research intensive university offering fully accredited distributed learning from its online virtual campus. Athabasca University bridges the learning, scholarship, and research environments to transform the social, economic, and environmental wellness of citizens,

their families, their communities, and their places of work in Alberta, Canada, and around the globe.

The University's open and digital learning environment coupled with flexible self-paced and cohort-based enrolments enables learners from all walks and stages of life to transform their own lives and their communities through higher learning. Athabasca University offers credit and non-credit learning experiences that lead to professional, undergraduate, masters, and doctoral credentials across an ever-evolving and comprehensive spectrum of disciplines. As a global leader in digitally enabled and distributed learning, the University's interactive and lifelong connection to learners is continuously innovating in learning models, course design, pedagogy, learner support services, traditional and non-traditional pathways, and educational technology applications.

The University's steadfast commitment to equality and inclusive lifelong learning is demonstrated through its proactive and systemic dismantling of barriers that stand between diverse individuals and their personal learning goals. With a global presence, Athabasca University welcomes people who prefer the University's innovative and digital learning environment from urban, rural, and remote locations everywhere. As leaders in inclusion, Athabasca University enables learners from underserved populations, those from Indigenous ancestry, those who by choice or through life circumstance cannot attend a place-based university, and those attending place-based post-secondaries who crave increased flexibility and control. An inspired and willing partner within Alberta's Adult Learning System, Athabasca University collaborates with a wide array of stakeholders to amplify the opportunities and success for learners and their communities.

By bringing learning to individuals, Athabasca University's model of access creates a meaningful and personalized sense of place, affinity, and belonging for learners in their community. Students are encouraged to embrace and leverage their unique background, history, and community while they learn. Comprehensive learner support services further enable students to focus on their learning and facilitate success in the University's distributed learning environment from a position of physical and mental wellness.

Athabasca University's demonstrated excellence in research and scholarship stems from its steadfast commitment to the centrality of research in the creation and mobilization of knowledge, the enhancement of academic programs, the education of students, and the betterment of communities. Athabasca University's research environment brings together academics, students, and key stakeholders in a disciplinary and interdisciplinary tapestry of scholarship and research that optimizes the economic, social, and environmental impact on communities. A combination of researcher-, student-, and community-led research and innovation initiatives in open and traditional scholarship are supported by the University as well as local, provincial, federal, and international research grants.

Athabasca University's academic and operational staff help to transform the communities through service leadership in numerous public, not-for-profit, social, and professional environments. Members of the University are encouraged to enable mutually supportive communities through active participation in a wide range of organizations at the local, provincial, national, and international levels.

The revised Mandate is in alignment with the Roles and Mandate Policy Framework ([I.C1.09](#)) developed by Alberta Advanced Education in March 2019.

Athabasca University' goals are articulated in the University's Strategic Plan. The *IMAGINE* Plan ([I.C1.13](#)) drives all the planning at the University. As noted above, the University is undertaking transformational institutional change ([I.C1.14](#)). We recognize that there are unprecedented opportunities for innovation, leadership, and collaboration in online learning. To this end, the University has been successful in managing and aligning its planning and resource allocation processes to ensure our strategic directions and priority outcomes are accomplished.

In addition to *IMAGINE*, AU's major achievements include sound financial management documented in recent annual reports ([I.C1.10](#), [I.C1.11](#), [I.C1.12](#)). Other achievements are outlined throughout this Self-Study (see Standard VI for a more detailed analysis).

a. are developed through appropriate collaborative participation by all who facilitate or are otherwise responsible for institutional development and improvement;

Athabasca University's strategic planning development was an inclusive and iterative process. Plan development was led, supported, and stewarded by a Working Group and Steering Team and included broad representation of faculty and staff from the University ([I.C1a.01](#)).

To ensure transparency and university-wide involvement in its development, the plan was further vetted, discussed, and refined with input from the university community through community-wide consultations ([I.C1a.02](#), [I.C1a.03](#)).

b. address external as well as internal contexts and constituencies

The Ministry of Advanced Education's Roles and Mandate document (March 2019) requires post-secondary institutions to adhere to criteria to differentiate more readily among post-secondary institutions by sector and characteristics. In addition to its institutional culture of openness and flexibility, AU contributes to regional access to undergraduate degree programming in Alberta, Canada, and beyond ([I.C1b.04](#), [I.C1b.05](#)).

Pursuant to Section 102.3(3) of Alberta's *Post-Secondary Learning Act (PSLA)* ([I.C1b.01](#)), AU collaborates with other post-secondary institutions to support regional access to post-secondary education. These collaborations inform AU's mission and goal development processes. AU's collaboration mandate results in the University working with other sectors and partners to ensure learner needs are met. These partnerships enhance post-secondary system accessibility and coordination across the province of Alberta. Through these collaborations, AU contributes to regional stewardship, which helps determine, prioritize, and enable access to post-secondary opportunities. A few examples are provided below.

Alberta Dual Credit Program

AU participates in Alberta's Dual Credit Program ([I.C1b.02](#)), which gives high-school learners a head start toward advanced studies and employment opportunities by allowing them to earn high-school and post-secondary course credits simultaneously.

Partnerships with First Nations Colleges and Universities

Articulation agreements between AU and five Alberta First Nations post-secondary institutions allow learners at these institutions to transfer credits earned to AU certificate, diploma, and degree programs.

An agreement between the AU Faculty of Business (FB) and the Aboriginal Financial Officers Association of Alberta (AFOA) ([I.C1b.08](#)) enables Indigenous learners to complete a Bachelor of Commerce degree at AU. This innovative partnership provides learners with access to a unique hybrid learning model including online courses via digital course delivery, classroom block sessions with AU professors, and AFOA mentorship support.

AU plans to duplicate this type of partnership with other Indigenous organizations across the province. The success of the hybrid learning model will also provide a foundation on which to expand the approach to other courses and programs.

Re-engaging with collaborating institutions and exploring new opportunities to promote existing articulation agreements and online course delivery strategies that serve the educational needs of Indigenous learners are priorities for AU in the years ahead. Through these partnerships, AU contributes to the decolonization of higher education in ways recommended by the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* in its *Calls to Action* ([I.C1b.03](#)).

In addition to these partnerships, external constituencies such as colleges, businesses, and rural municipalities have benefited from the sharing of AU's IT infrastructure in Northern Alberta. For example, in 2020, AU partnered with Grand Prairie Regional College (GPRC) to improve access to education opportunities for students in northern Alberta. The new partnership will see GPRC join AU's online learning platform, moving current courses online and developing new online courses. This is innovative partnership will allow GPRC to achieve its goal of being more inclusive, modern, and accessible for students across northern Alberta and beyond ([I.C1b.06](#), [I.C1b.07](#)).

Partnerships with other Colleges and Universities

Other examples of partnerships with institutions include a block transfer agreement between Red Deer College and AU in 2019 to provide pathways into the Sociology and Psychology majors in the Bachelor of Arts program at AU ([I.C1b.09](#)). A similar agreement with the Red Deer College is in process with respect to the Criminal Justice as well as Governance, Law, and Management degrees in the Bachelor of Professional Arts.

c. are approved and supported by the governing body

Athabasca University's mission and goals are approved and supported by a bicameral governance structure comprised of The Governors of Athabasca University (the Board) and the Athabasca University General Faculties Council (GFC). The Board manages and operates the institution in accordance with its mandate. The conduct, management, and control of the University and all its property, revenue, and business affairs are vested in the Board. The Board has delegated responsibility and authority to Standing Committees to make decisions on behalf of the Board as defined in the Terms of Reference and Membership for each Committee. The GFC, subject to the authority of the board, is responsible for the academic and student affairs of the University. The powers of GFC are set out under section 26 of the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* ([I.C1c.02](#)) and section 13 of the *Athabasca University Regulation* ([I.C1c.01](#)), and include granting degrees, approval of academic programs, academic policies, academic awards, and the University Calendar. Both governing bodies have gone through comprehensive reviews since 2010 when the last self-study was written. See Standard VII for detailed information on the University's governance, leadership, and administration.

d. guide faculty, administration, staff, and governing structures in making decisions related to planning, resource allocation, program and curricular development, and the definition of institutional and educational outcomes

Athabasca University entered its first full cycle of integrated planning in April 2018. Integrated planning has introduced a strong element of openness to AU's resource planning process and is central to the successful implementation of the University's Strategic Plan. See Standard VI for detailed information on AU's integrated planning cycle.

e. include support of scholarly inquiry and creative activity, at levels and of the type appropriate to the institutions;

Athabasca University's demonstrated excellence in research and scholarship stems from its steadfast commitment to the centrality of research in the creation and mobilization of knowledge, the enhancement of academic programs, the education of students, and the betterment of communities.

AU's research environment brings together academics, students, and key stakeholders in disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholarship and research. A combination of researchers, students, and community-led research and innovation initiatives in open and traditional scholarship are supported by the University as well as local, federal, and international research grants.

Athabasca University's existing and emerging research is in alignment with and supports outcomes identified in the *Alberta Research and Innovation Framework* ([I.C1e.01](#)). The University's research strengths are grouped into four broad themes: environmental and societal dynamics of sustainability; disruptive pedagogies; society, culture, health and well-being; and digital futures ([I.C1e.02](#), Pages 11–13).

AU's Research Chairs ([I.C1e.03](#)) anchor other research initiatives outlined in the *Strategic Research Plan*. In addition, there are a growing number of internal venues for sharing disciplinary, Indigenous, cross-faculty, and non-traditional research and scholarship such as the annual Graduate Student Research Conference ([I.C1e.04](#)), the AU Learning Conference ([I.C1e.05](#)), the Research Forum, Faculty-led Symposia, Think Tank Sessions ([I.C1e.07](#)), and Research talks and webinars ([I.C1e.06](#)) that invite the presentation of research at various stages of development. They include monthly research webinars, informal sessions with AU researchers and scientists from external agencies, and meetings of several interdisciplinary research groups.

f. are publicized and widely known by the institution's internal stakeholders;

The University's Mission ([I.C1f.01](#)) is widely known and publicized on the University's websites and external advertising. The passion for AU's Mission remains constant.

g. are periodically evaluated

The Mission is reviewed by the AU community each time a new strategic plan is being prepared, since the Mission features prominently in it, and is a matter of continuing importance to institutional culture. See also criterion 4.

**Criterion 2.
Institutional goals that are realistic, appropriate to higher education and consistent with the mission.**

AU's strategic goals are centered on teaching and learning success, research and development success, and AU success. The *IMAGINE* Plan ([I.C2.01](#)) is consistent with and complements the University's Mission. The strategic directions and priority outcomes are realistic, and the achievement indicators are specific and measurable.

**Criterion 3.
Institutional goals that focus on student learning and related outcomes and on institutional improvement, are supported by administrative, educational, and student support programs and services, and are consistent with institutional mission.**

IT, human resources, and Institutional Data Analysis provide the technology, personnel, and administrative support that is sufficiently resourced to monitor, improve, and evaluate the student learning experience.

AU's response to the 2018 Monitoring Report ([I.C3.01](#)) shows evidence of program and course alignment with institutional learning outcomes. Development and affirmation of institutional learning outcomes is underway (see Section V for details).

In January 2020, AU announced several institutional changes, reconfigurations, reorganizations, reviews, and engagements in support of *IMAGINE* and the *IMAGINE Learning Framework*. Specifically, AU will undertake changes, reorganizations, and reconfigurations that will enable the University to achieve the Integrated Learning Environment Program. The transformational changes include:

- a. Reviewing or modifying job roles, reporting structures, and/or team composition;
- b. Introducing, modifying, retiring, or enhancing new or existing IT systems; and
- c. Reviewing, designing, or redesigning methods of service delivery.

Specifically, the projects include:

1. Establishing a Learning Experience Design team;
2. Establishing a Learning Experience Production team;
3. Creating a Responsive and Academic Support Model;
4. Creating a OneAU Service Model dedicated to Student Navigation Services;
5. Reviewing the Annual Duties and Responsibility Assignments for Academic Staff;
6. Optimizing our Information Technology team;
7. Creating a OneAU Service Model in Marketing and Communications;
8. Creating a OneAU Service Model of Learner Recruitment;
9. Optimizing our Finance and Administration team;
10. Creating a OneAU Service Model for Financial Planning and Analysis;
11. Creating a University Data and Analytics Framework;
12. Centralizing Registrar Office Functions; and
13. Reviewing and Redesigning Excluded Leadership and Support Roles.

This phase in our *IMAGINE* journey involves a suite of changes between April 2020 through to 2022. The development of a website dedicated to this transformation is underway.

These changes are a result of assessment and evaluation (e.g., student journey mapping reports) which indicate that AU has opportunities to:

- a. enhance the learner experience by streamlining our course design and production processes;
- b. provide better support for academics who are feeling time pressures in achieving success in all aspects of their role;

- c. focus greater attention on the research intensity of the University;
- d. provide better support for learners academically throughout their asynchronous and self-directed learning journeys;
- e. provide better support for learners by improving the navigability and consistency of various parts of AU; and
- f. celebrate a OneAU culture that brings together experts from across AU in support of *IMAGINE*.

These changes will not only support student learning and related outcomes but will also contribute to institutional improvement. The work is critical and extensive and is intended to ensure that academic and non-academic staff in specific areas work closely together, that team members are supported, that the structures in place are sustainable and scalable to power global growth, and that the deployment of staff is in line with the University's *IMAGINE* plan.

Criterion 4. **Periodic assessment of mission and goals to ensure that they are relevant and achievable**

AU uses the external MSCHE self-study process and internal integrated planning and assessment processes to review and assess the University's mission and goals. Each integrated resource planning cycle engages university leaders in a review and analysis of AU's *IMAGINE* strategic directions and priority outcomes to ensure that operational priorities align with overall strategy. Executive Team (AU's Executive Leadership Team) evaluates the overall direction of *IMAGINE* annually and presents that finding to the Board in September. Please refer to Standard VI for more information.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Support AU's transformation, most notably the OneAU Service Model changes, reconfigurations, reorganizations, reviews, and engagements through effective planning, communication, and risk management for the entire change process.



Athabasca
University

Standard II: Ethics and Integrity

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Standard II: Ethics and Integrity

Ethics and integrity are central, indispensable, and defining hallmarks of effective higher education institutions. In all activities, whether internal or external, an institution must be faithful to its mission, honor its contracts and commitments, adhere to its policies, and represent itself truthfully.

OVERVIEW

A full description and illustration of the ways in which Athabasca University meets the nine criteria and all applicable sub-criteria of Standard II, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 1, 2 and 4 through 15, are presented here.

Criterion 1.

A commitment to academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and respect for intellectual property rights:

AU is committed to embracing and protecting freedom of enquiry and freedom of expression for all team members, learners, alumni, and visitors to the University within the limits of Canadian and Alberta law, even when the views expressed may not be shared with nor represent those of AU. The right to academic freedom is addressed separately in the context of the collective agreement with the Athabasca University Faculty Association.

Bound by the *Post-secondary Learning Act* (II.C1.01), the *Alberta Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIP Act for Alberta) (II.C1.02), and AU's *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* (the Code) (II.C1.03) and consistent with the institution's *IMAGINE* Plan, Athabasca University upholds the highest levels of ethics and integrity in its operations. The newly revised Code, implemented on September 1, 2019, and approved by Alberta's Ethics Commissioner, aligns with the AU's I-CARE values (II.C1.04) of Integrity, Community, Adaptability, Respect, and Excellence. In alignment with the PSLA, the FOIP Act for Alberta, and *IMAGINE*, the Code sets the framework and parameters for the way the members of the University community interact with each other, with AU students, and with individuals outside

the institution while demanding a commitment to ethical behavior and transparency in all actions and decisions. AU is committed to:

- Endorsing academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and respect for intellectual property rights;
- Fostering a climate of respect among its members;
- Ensuring that all policies and procedures, including those related to grievances, are fair, impartial, and equitable;
- Avoiding conflict of interest (or appearance of conflict of interest);
- Establishing fair and impartial practices in the recruitment, evaluation, promotion, discipline, and separation of employees;
- Practicing honesty and truthfulness in public relations announcements, internal communications, and recruiting and admissions materials and practices;
- Promoting affordability, accessibility, and funding resources and options for students;
- Complying with all applicable reporting policies and requirements; and
- Assessing ethics and integrity as evidenced in institutional policies, processes, and practices and the manner in which these are implemented.

Athabasca University is committed to academic freedom, intellectual freedom, freedom of expression, and respect for intellectual property rights. Internal policies outline the procedures

governing these tenets, and external laws and acts support them. The policies are referenced and made available on the Office of the University Secretariat website ([II.C1.05](#)).

The Athabasca University Faculty Association (AUFA) ([II.C1.16](#)), established in 1976, represents faculty and professional staff members and is governed by bylaws. AUFA is a voluntary organization that operates under the Societies Act. The organization bargains on behalf of its academic (faculty) and non-academic (professional) staff members. AUFA has a collective agreement that parallels other Canadian universities in terms of tenure, protection of academic freedom, the right to sabbaticals, and a commitment to research (see [II.C1.06](#) Section 11.2 outlines Academic Freedom; Section 11.3 outlines Professional Freedom).

AU is committed to freedom of expression. The University's statement on freedom of expression is posted on the President's website. In addition, freedom of expression is referenced in AU policies including the *Freedom of Enquiry and Expression Statement* ([II.C1.07](#)) and is supported by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* ([II.C1.09](#)), the *Canadian Human Rights Act* ([II.C1.10](#)) and the *Criminal Code* ([II.C1.11](#) sections 318–320) prohibit inciting hatred. Athabasca University has developed policies to further prevent verbal abuse, harassment, physical abuse, or sexual violence against students, staff, professionals, and faculty ([II.C1.12](#)).

AU places high value on providing an environment that allows for creativity and innovation in the teaching, learning and research activities integral to its mandate. Intellectual Property (IP) plays an essential role in both the research and teaching functions of universities and public comprehensive research institutions. The University revised its *Intellectual Property Policy* ([II.C1.13](#)) in Spring 2020. The new policy outlines the rights and responsibilities as to creation of, ownership in, and commercialization potential for intellectual property and articulates the creative rights of individuals in research.

The institution follows the *Copyright Act* ([II.C1.14](#)). AU has also developed policies and procedures on publication of research and dissertations and fair dealing.

There is consistent adherence to ethics in governance, administration, teaching, and the pursuit of research. The University offers research workshops and ethics training to its academic and non-academic staff. AU's Research Portal

([II.C1.15](#)) allows researchers to submit proposals for peer-review; the administration of funds follows guidelines and is subject to ethics approval where and when applicable.

Criterion 2.

A climate that fosters respect among students, faculty, staff, and administration from a range of diverse backgrounds, ideas, and perspectives:

Respect is earned and given among the members of the AU community and between AU and its community of learners. AU strives to be of service to the general public, regardless of level of experience, previous grades, or degrees. As an open access, online university, AU attracts a diverse student body. For example, 75% are first in family to pursue post-secondary education ([II.C2.08](#), Table 10, Page 7), and 29% have self-identified disabilities ([II.C2.08](#), Table 7, Page 6). Many do not have access to post-secondary education due to geographic location (11.4% live in rural Canada, [II.C2.06](#), Page 4-5). AU's population comprises mostly adult learners with average undergraduate student age being at 27.9, and the average graduate student age being at 34.3), specifically women (65% undergrad and 75.9% grad) ([II.C2.06](#), Page 1), with children 53% ([II.C2.08](#), Table 6, Page 5), and with career responsibilities (73% work more than 30 hours a week ([II.C2.08](#), Table 16, Page 11).

AU's Accessibility Services (AS) ([II.C2.01](#)) office works in partnership with students to provide access to online education. AS is committed to providing students who have disabilities with reasonable, individualized accommodations and support services to facilitate access to and successful completion of undergraduate and graduate programs and courses. AU is thus well positioned to attract and engage with a diverse population of students who may otherwise not have access to post-secondary education.

With respect to employment equity, AU has in place an *Employment Equity Policy Statement* ([II.C2.02](#)) posted on its website. In addition to this statement, AU has recently signed the *Dimensions Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Charter* ([II.C2.03](#)). As well, a 2019-2020 deliverable of *IMAGINE* is the development of an AU Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Framework and Action Plans. The EDI Framework ([II.C2.04](#), [II.C2.10](#)), currently in draft form, will serve as a foundational document in

support of AU's commitment to bringing awareness to and addressing systematic barriers to achieving an inclusive society.

The institution's Centre for World Indigenous Knowledge and Research (CWIKR) received its Cree name "Nukskahtowin" (meaning "Meeting Place") in 2019 by AU's Elder-In-Residence, Dr. Maria Campbell ([II.C2.07](#)). Nukskahtowin offers courses in Cree language, history, contemporary issues, education, governance, women's studies, justice, and research projects for individuals and groups in the overarching areas of business, management, leadership, and governance. In conjunction with the Faculty of Business, Nukskahtowin will be offering a Bachelor of Commerce with a Post-Diploma route in the field of Indigenous Business. Conciliation Working Groups comprising AU alumni and faculty with the aim of integrating Indigenous knowledge, perspectives and teaching methods have also been established across AU's faculties.

The institution's 2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey ([II.C2.05](#), Page 78, Question 69) reflects that 4.8% of AU students identified as Indigenous. The overall percentage for Alberta post-secondaries is 4.6%.

Criterion 3.

A grievance policy that is documented and disseminated to address complaints or grievances raised by students, faculty, or staff. The institution's policies and procedures are fair and impartial, and assure that grievances are addressed promptly, appropriately, and equitably:

AU has in place policies and procedures to address complaints and grievances. It also has specific grievance related articles housed within each of its collective agreements that provide students, faculty, and staff with well-documented guidelines for the grievance process. The unions/associations are the Athabasca University Faculty Association (AUFA) ([II.C3.06](#)), the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) ([II.C3.07](#)); the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees (AUPE) ([II.C3.08](#)), and the Athabasca University Graduate Students' Association (AUGSA) ([II.C3.09](#)). The governing processes and procedures relate to either the student population or to each of the employee groups and provide an opportunity for parties to identify, address, and rectify complaints and grievances.

AU's *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* ([II.C3.01](#)), is governed by the *Conflicts of Interest Act* ([II.C3.02](#)). The Code and its related procedures ([II.C3.01](#)) ensure that complaints and grievances are conducted objectively and impartially.

In relation to students, undergraduate students in individualized study courses who have been assigned tutors or academic experts, are encouraged to bring forward any concerns regarding their relationships with their tutors or academic experts to Human Resources. The University service standards ([II.C3.03](#)) outline the processes and specify among other guidelines, two business days to respond to inquiries.

Both undergraduate and graduate students may also reach out directly to their instructors and/or course coordinators or contact the University Ombuds Office. These contact options are made available to undergraduate students through their individual course specific welcome letters found within their MyAU Student Portal ([II.C3.13](#)). Learning Services Tutorial is also listed as the primary contact unit on the public AU website under both the "Contact Us" ([II.C3.11](#)) page and on the "Academic Service Standards" website ([II.C3.03](#)).

Students, faculty, and staff can exercise the *Student Academic Misconduct Policy* ([II.C3.04](#)) (to address concerns of academic offences such as plagiarism and cheating) and the *Non-Academic Misconduct Policy* ([II.C3.05](#)) (to address non-academic infractions, including but not limited to sexual harassment and physical, written, and verbal forms of abuse).

All students can exercise the *Student Appeals Policy* ([II.C3.10](#)), which is made available in multiple public-facing websites such as the University Calendar ([II.C3.15](#)), within the Office of the Registrar website ([II.C3.14](#)), and within the MyAU student portal ([II.C3.13](#), Page 5).

Criterion 4.

The avoidance of conflict of interest or the appearance of such conflict in all activities and among all constituents:

In compliance with the *Alberta Conflicts of Interests Act*, AU has a newly implemented *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* ([II.C4.01](#)) (*the Code*) that incorporates Conflict of Interest Policies and Procedures. Governing bodies and respective standing committees are asked to

declare a conflict of interest with items contained within the agenda at every meeting. The institution has also developed a new *Code of Conduct for the Board of Governors* (II.C4.02). These Codes incorporate the provisions for conflicts of interest. AU employees are required to complete a *Conflict of Interest Disclosure Report* (II.C4.17) at the time of hire and update them during annual assessments.

The *Conflicts of Interest Procedure* (II.C4.03) provides the following guidance: Recognizing Conflicts of Interest; Disclosure of Conflicts of Interest (Actual, Potential, and Perceived); Conducting Pending Assessment; Reporting Officers, Assessments and Plans; Appeals; and Confidentiality. AU also has *Protected Disclosure (Whistleblower) Procedures* (II.C4.04); a *Donation Acceptance Policy* (II.C4.05); an *Investment Policy* (II.C4.06); a *Partnerships Policy* (II.C4.07); and a *Harassment Policy* (II.C4.08).

Research Ethics

Athabasca University's *Conflict of Interest in Research Policy* defines a conflict of interest in research (II.C4.09). The Research Ethics Board (REB) works with the researcher to decide how to manage any real, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest that cannot be avoided or prevented, that may jeopardize the integrity of research or the protection offered to participants in research.

Internal related references, policies, procedures and forms include: *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Policy* (II.C4.11); *Research Integrity Policy* (II.C4.12); and *Application for External Research Funding Policy* (II.C4.13).

External related references, policies, procedures and forms include: 2nd edition of *Tri-Agency Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* (2018) (II.C4.14); *Agreement on the Administration of Agency Grants and Awards by Research Institutions* (2018) (II.C4.15); and the *Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research* (2011) (II.C4.16).

Criterion 5. Fair and impartial practices in the hiring, evaluation, promotion, discipline, and separation of employees:

AU has in place policies and procedures and approximately 100 articles within the four collective agreements relating to the employee life cycle,

including but not limited to: hiring, evaluation, promotion, discipline, and separation of employees.

AU follows applicable employment standards, equity guidelines, and industry related hiring guidelines as part of its hiring practices and ensures all recruitment committee members are aware of their responsibilities for confidentiality and impartiality when participating in such recruitments. Hiring practices ensure the process remains confidential, inclusive, and objective.

Performance evaluation practices occur on an ongoing basis through continuing performance management as well as annually through a performance appraisal and self-assessment process (II.C5.02). This annual process also enables faculty and staff to review the code of conduct and conflict of interest policies. The comprehensive promotion practices involve the recruitment committee originally tasked with recruiting the faculty or staff member, and in the case of faculty, mandates the assessment of the application by academics external to the institution. Each of AU's collective agreements outlines the criteria, instructions, and timelines related to discipline of faculty and staff, all of which follow the principles of progressive discipline.

In addition to AU's onboarding process for new faculty and staff, AU also has in place an off-boarding process that enables a smooth transition away from AU as well as mechanisms for departing faculty and staff to share their experiences and opportunities for innovation and improvement through an exit interview.

AU's *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* (II.C5.01), serves to ensure that the applicable policies, procedures, and collective agreement articles are managed, addressed, and adhered to promptly, appropriately, and equitably. In addition to the regular employee life cycle standards such as hiring and promotion, AU has a number of policies, procedures, benefits, and collective agreement articles that provide substantial employee-related benefits and incentives. These include but are not limited to: substantial individual and/or group professional development funds and professional development days; encouragement for employees and their families to take tuition free courses at AU; research and study leave entitlements for faculty and professional staff; flexible work schedules; flexible work location arrangements, including the ability to work from home; and research, continuing development and community engagement

responsibilities within faculty academic work plans ([II.C5.03](#), [II.C5.04](#), [II.C5.05](#), [II.C5.06](#)).

Criterion 6. Honesty and truthfulness in public relations announcements, advertisements, recruiting, and admissions materials and practices, as well as in internal communications:

As a digital-first post-secondary institution, internal and external communications across AU are carried out digitally. The University ensures transparent communication through the following virtual venues, among others:

- Neil's Notes ([II.C6.01](#));
- Media and Publications ([II.C6.02](#));
- University Initiatives ([II.C6.03](#)); Magazines and Publications ([II.C6.04](#)) including "Open Magazine" ([II.C6.08](#)) and "The Voice" ([II.C6.09](#)); and
- The Hub ([II.C6.05](#))

AU's brand and editorial guidelines ([II.C6.06](#)) lay out the criteria for identity standards and quality control ([II.C6.07](#)). It is the responsibility of employees at AU to familiarize themselves with the brand and editorial guidelines and adhere to them. AU's website is forever fluid, as the look and content are regularly updated to maintain a modern, cohesive, and user-friendly site. A strategic communication framework is under development to further enhance communication at AU.

Criterion 7. As appropriate to its mission, services or programs in place: a. to promote affordability and accessibility; b. to enable students to understand funding sources and options, value received for cost, and methods to make informed decisions about incurring debt;

a. to promote affordability and accessibility;

In *IMAGINE*, AU sets three main goals concerning student affordability: "Optimized student

affordability in new tuition, fee, and financial support model [2020]"; "A scalable and sustainable open scholarship framework [2020]"; and "Personalized on-line and off-line learning model that is flexible, scalable, and affordable to the learner and to AU [2021]."

According to statistics collected by Statistics Canada and presented by *Universities Canada* ([II.C7a.01](#)), AU's undergraduate tuition and fees are lower than many Canadian post-secondary institutions. As with the majority of Canadian universities, tuition fees at AU vary for in-province Canadians, out of province Canadians and non-Canadians ([II.C7a.02](#)).

To further enhance student affordability, AU is committed to making increased use of *Open Educational Resources* (OERs) ([II.C7a.03](#)) materials in our courses.

A priority outcome in the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* is the development of a "Learning Resource Strategy, including a project timeline, to ensure integrated, affordable, accessible, up-to-date, and high-quality learning resources across all courses and programs." This work is underway. A Learning Resource Strategy may result in increased student affordability.

AU is working on a *Tuition and Affordability Framework* with the goal of creating a framework that is affordable and accessible, flexible and adaptable, sustainable and scalable, equitable and predictable ([II.C7a.05](#), [II.C7a.06](#)). The work will result in a competitive fee structure, appropriate financial supports for learners, and more flexible payment options among other features. In addition to this work, in preparation for the FY2021-22 academic year, AU conducted a rigorous price sensitivity analysis to ensure that the institution's tuition and fees are competitive in the Canadian market ([II.C7a.04](#)).

b. to enable students to understand funding sources and options, value received for cost, and methods to make informed decisions about incurring debt;

To facilitate students' navigation of AU's unique course models and timelines, students are provided with multiple means to calculate the potential costs of tuition and fees for a single course, multiple courses, and/or an entire certificate or degree through the Course Fee Calculator ([II.C7b.01](#)) and in section 7.1.1 Fee Summary ([II.C7b.02](#)) of the Undergraduate Calendar. Section 7.1 Fees ([II.C7b.03](#)) provides information on fees relating to:

Canadian Student Fees ([II.C7b.04](#)); Non-Canadian Student Fees ([II.C7b.05](#)); Students Outside Canada ([II.C7b.06](#)); Courses Without Course Packages ([II.C7b.07](#)); Estimated Undergraduate Program Fees ([II.C7b.08](#)); Challenge for Credit ([II.C7b.09](#)); Academic-Related Fees ([II.C7b.10](#)); Students' Union/ Alumni Relations Fees ([II.C7b.11](#)); G.S.T. ([II.C7b.12](#)); Methods of Payment ([II.C7b.13](#)); Courier Fees ([II.C7b.14](#)); Refunds ([II.C7b.15](#)); Delinquent Accounts ([II.C7b.16](#)); Receipts ([II.C7b.17](#)); and Form T2202A ([II.C7b.18](#)). Undergraduate and Graduate withdrawal and refund policies are outlined in the [University Calendar](#).

The Office of the Registrar provides information on Student Financial Aid ([II.C7b.23](#)) eligibility and academic requirements ([II.C7b.24](#)) and the application process and procedures ([II.C7b.25](#)). To inform students' decisions when incurring debt, the Office of the Registrar encourages students to contact an AU Student Financial Aid Advisor ([II.C7b.26](#)), and to read the Frequently Asked Questions ([II.C7b.27](#)), Keeping Your Loans Interest Free ([II.C7b.28](#)), and Repayment of Your Loan ([II.C7b.29](#)) sites. Students are also guided to use the tools on the Money Matters ([II.C7b.30](#)) site, which provides information on CanLearn ([II.C7b.31](#)), a national education planning and financing portal, and to use AU's Counselling Services' online resource ([II.C7b.32](#)) which assists students in exploring alternative funding resources to finance their education.

In addition to the traditional sources for student funding, students with disabilities are potentially eligible for financial aid programs, which are outlined on the National Educational Association of Disabled Students ([II.C7b.33](#)) directory of funding. Accessibility Services works cooperatively with students who are ineligible or unsuccessful in applying for funding to find alternative solutions to achieve reasonable accommodation of their needs.

The *Student Awards Policy* ([II.C7b.34](#)) and *Procedures* ([II.C7b.35](#)) are publicly available on AU's website. The Office of the Registrar - Student Awards ([II.C7b.36](#)) also provides information on the application and nomination processes for internal and external undergraduate and graduate student awards and bursaries. AU offers several awards targeted to the unique and specific needs of its students:

- AU Access to Students with Disabilities Technology & Support Services Bursary;
- AU Award for a Mature Undergraduate Student;
- AU First in Family to Attend University Award; and
- AU First Nation Colleges Student Awards.

The Athabasca University Students' Union (AUSU) also operates an Awards and Bursaries Programs ([II.C7b.37](#)), which "is intended to promote and acknowledge academic achievement and community spirit in the membership population, as well as to provide aid to members who encounter financial hardships."

AU's 2017 Biennial Undergraduate Student Experience Survey ([II.C7b.38](#), Table 5.4, Page 32), found that 84.7% of students who have used financial aid services were satisfied with the services.

Criterion 8. **Compliance with all applicable federal, state, and Commission reporting policies, regulations, and requirements to include reporting regarding:**

a. the full disclosure of information on institution-wide assessments, graduation, retention, certification and licensure or licensing board pass rates;

Like other post-secondary institutions in Alberta, AU follows a schedule of accountability reporting to Alberta Advanced Education. Throughout the year, AU submits information related to enrolment, finances, surveys, tuition, and academic programs ([II.C8a.03](#)).

AU publishes information about student achievement on its website ([II.C8a.01](#)).

The following programs are accredited or approved by licensure/approval bodies.

Table 4. Faculty of Health Disciplines Accreditation

Program Name	Accreditor	Approver
Post-LPN Bachelor of Nursing	Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN)	Nursing Education Program Approval Committee (NEPAC)
Post-RN Bachelor of Nursing	CASN	N/A
Master of Nursing: Nurse Practitioner	CASN	NEPAC
Master of Counseling	N/A	College of Alberta Psychologists

The Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN), Bachelor of Nursing program can lead directly to licensure by an external agency; this program meets the requirements of the Nursing Education Program Approval Committee in Alberta. Graduates write the registration examination approved by the College & Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA). Starting in 2015, CARNA switched to the NCLEX-RN licensing examination. In keeping with our provincial counterparts, AU does not publish institutional level results. Graduates of the Master of Nursing: Nurse Practitioner program are eligible to write the Canadian Nurse Practitioner Exam (CNPE) ([II.C8a.02](#)).

Criterion 9. **Periodic assessment of ethics and integrity as evidenced in institutional policies, processes, practices, and the manner in which these are implemented.**

AU reminds staff of the requirement of ethical conduct in all their workplace activities through the required login process to access AU computer facilities and websites for staff use ([II.C9.01](#)).

As noted above, employees are bound by the University's Code of Conduct. In addition, AU asks members of the University community for declaration of any conflict at the beginning of any meeting.

For more information on periodic assessment of ethics and integrity, please see Standard VII.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Continue to contribute to the decolonization of the academy in ways recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in its Calls to Action.
2. Actualize Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles expressed in AU's EDI Framework.
3. Decrease manual interventions and create guidelines and criteria in relation to performance measures to enhance the annual performance assessment process. Areas for innovation and improvement in relation to the employee life cycle include the opportunity to expand, expedite, and digitize the on-boarding experience and off-boarding process.



Athabasca
University

Standard III – Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study



Standard III – Design and Delivery of the Student Learning Experience

An institution provides students with learning experiences that are characterized by rigor and coherence at all program, certificate, and degree levels, regardless of instructional modality. All learning experiences, regardless of modality, program pace/schedule, level, and setting are consistent with higher education expectations.

OVERVIEW

Athabasca University meets the Requirements of Standard III. A full description and illustration of the ways in which AU meets the eight criteria and all applicable sub-criteria of Standard III, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 8, 9, 10, and 15, are presented here.

Criterion 1.
... certificate, undergraduate, graduate, and/or professional programs leading to a degree or other recognized higher education credential, of a length appropriate to the objectives of the degree or other credential, designed to foster a coherent student learning experience and to promote synthesis of learning;

AU Programs

As a public post-secondary institution in Alberta, all degree programs, diplomas and certificates offered by AU are governed by the *Post-Secondary Learning Act 2003* ([III.C1.01](#)) and the *Programs of Study Regulation (91/2009)* ([III.C1.02](#)). All credential establishments, changes, suspensions, and terminations require government ministerial approval and go through a rigorous internal approval process. Degree program proposals and changes must also go through vetting by the Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) ([III.C1.20](#)). Further, to help students achieve their transfer and

occupational goals, AU has adopted the national learning outcomes at the Bachelor, Masters and Doctoral levels described in the *Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework* ([III.C1.03](#)).

The rigorous degree approval process ensures that credentials are coherent from their inception, align with AU strategic, academic, and operational plans and budgets, and meet the criteria, appropriate to the credential level, set out by CAQC. New programs go through a formal development process to ensure that they meet internal and external standards, deliver a program designed around program learning outcomes, employ engaging pedagogies and work-integrated learning as appropriate, and are supported by appropriate resources including academic and administrative staff, information technologies, and academic and student services. These processes ensure a coherent student learning experience that places importance on synthesis of learning ([III.C1.04a](#), [III.C1.04b](#), [III.C1.04c](#), [III.C1.04d](#)).

AU supports a coherent student learning experience through a rigorous course development and review process that emphasizes strong academic content and rigour, strong pedagogy, clear presentation of learning materials, and appropriate student services. Additionally, as noted in Standard V, faculty and program councils create and maintain

curriculum maps that demonstrate how course learning outcomes and assessments are aligned with specific program learning outcomes. Synthesis of learning is built into AU programs through project-based learning experiences, capstone courses and projects, and practicums, as appropriate.

The currency of AU's credentials is further sustained through a continuous improvement process that comprises many different activities, including regular course revisions which incorporate feedback received from course evaluations, developments in professional practice, and research across various disciplines and university activities intended to facilitate the continuous improvement process. Examples include discipline-focused meetings, faculty councils, and the use of regular data collection (e.g., internal and external surveys) to support decision-making. Program currency is enhanced by the ongoing process of external reviews and the development of new courses which are created in response to potential gaps in the curriculum and evidence of student interest in an area of study. Program effectiveness is further assessed through various institutional systems including benchmark surveys, curriculum mapping, annual faculty reviews of programs, cyclical program reviews, institution-wide reviews of AU's course and program mix, faculty and leadership team reviews of program "health" reports, and various reviews by professional and regulatory bodies ([III.C1.08](#)).

Students and prospective students have multiple ways to access information about programs, courses, and policies concerning completion of courses and programs. The AU [Undergraduate](#) and [Graduate](#) Calendars (which include program regulations and course syllabi) are publicly available online for prospective and current learners. Additional information is provided on institutional and faculty websites. Students may contact the AU Information Centre for more detailed information or the Counselling Services team for career planning support. To assist students in planning their personalized completion pathways, AU provides access to tools and resources, including DegreeWorks and program plans ([III.C1.07](#), [III.C1.07a](#)). Individualized support in program completion planning is available to all students through general and faculty-specific advising teams.

Athabasca University aims to provide learner-centred, quality-driven, and community-based supports to students throughout their learning journeys. Currently available academic supports include: counselling services ([III.C1.09](#)), access to

an online orientation platform ([III.C1.10](#), [III.C1.19](#)), course and program advising ([III.C1.11](#)), access to the AU Write Site ([III.C1.12](#)) and Math Site ([III.C1.13](#), [III.C1.20](#)), [library services](#), digital literacy webinars ([III.C1.15](#)), access to an orientation to Moodle (AU's current Learning Management System) ([III.C1.16](#)), access to mental health and wellness resources ([III.C1.17](#)), and Accessibility Services ([III.C1.18](#)). Survey data suggests that the majority of AU's students feel supported, but there are opportunities to improve communication of and connection to academic support for geographically dispersed learners ([III.C1.21](#), Page 6).

Criterion 2.

... student learning experiences that are designed, delivered, and assessed by faculty (full-time or part-time) and/or other appropriate professionals who are:

- a. rigorous and effective in teaching, assessment of student learning, scholarly inquiry, and service, as appropriate to the institution's mission, goals, and policies;
 - b. qualified for the positions they hold and the work they do;
 - c. sufficient in number;
 - d. provided with and utilize sufficient opportunities, resources, and support for professional growth and innovation;
 - e. reviewed regularly and equitably based on written, disseminated, clear, and fair criteria, expectations, policies, and procedures;
- a. rigorous and effective in teaching, assessment of student learning, scholarly inquiry, and service

AU has a strong and dedicated faculty who balance teaching, assessment, administration, and research responsibilities. The Board-Athabasca University Faculty Association Collective Agreement identifies five academic roles: Professor, Associate Professor, Assistant Professor, Lecturer, and Academic Coordinator. The criteria for appointment and promotion for these roles include academic and

professional effectiveness, service to the University and society, and, for all academic roles except Academic Coordinator, research, and creative activity ([III.C2a.02](#)).

Other professionals, such as learning designers, instructional media analysts, visual communications designers, multimedia web specialists, course production editors, copyright officers, and librarians, support faculty in delivering quality, continuity, and coherence in the institution's educational programs. In all the cases, the duties and qualifications are set out in role descriptions that are subject to rigorous review and classification, as per the *Support and Professional Positions Policy* ([III.C2a.01](#)).

All faculties follow the Course Development Policy ([III.C2a.03](#)) and have similar processes for course development and revision. There is a Community of Practice for all course development and productions staff ([III.C2a.04](#)).

Moving forward, AU will be enhancing course development and production processes as part of the One AU Transformation Initiatives ([III.C2a.05](#)). The Learning Experience Design project will result in a centralized learning design team for all of AU. A Learning Experience Production team will also

be constituted to further enhance the learning experience by delivering interactive multi-media design and technical development of online learning experiences with Brightspace tools and functions for AU academic ILE needs. These teams will be in place for the launch of the Integrated Learning Environment. We anticipate a much richer student experience from these changes.

b. hold requisite qualifications

The qualifications for faculty and tutorial staff are set out in collective agreements ([III.C2b.01](#)) and supported through human resources policies, procedures, and practices ([III.C2b.02](#)).

The qualifications and number of faculty members which support each program at Athabasca University are key criteria in program creation and review processes, as set out in the CAQC standards ([III.C2b.03](#)), and are therefore subject to ongoing internal and external review.

c. sufficient in number

Course development and delivery at AU is largely carried out by the following teams:

Table 5. Academic Staff Members (data as of October 6, 2020)

Full Time Academic Staff	Professor	44
	Associate Professor	66
	Assistant Professor	47
	Academic Coordinator	24
Part Time Academic Staff	Assistant Professor	2
	Academic Coordinator	7

Table 6. Tutorial Staff (data as of October 6, 2020)

Tutorial Staff	365
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Table 7. Course Development Professionals (data as of October 6, 2020)

Course Production Coordinator	10
Course Production Editor	9
Learning Designer	7
Instructional Media Analysts	4
Multimedia and Web Specialist	10
Visual Communication Designer	2

Table 8. Library Staff Involved in Course Design and Delivery by Process

Participation in Course Teams, Tutorial and Webinar Creation and Delivery	5
Associate University Librarian, Learning & Research Services	1
Information Literacy & Resource Access Librarian	1
Digital Literacy Librarian	1
Copyright Officer	1
Instruction and Reference Services Librarian	1
Course Materials Acquisition and Delivery	8
University Librarian	1
Associate University Librarian, Collections Services	1
Library Assistant, Collections Services	1
Library Assistant, Learning & Research Services/Technical Services	1
Library Assistant, Course Materials	1
Associate University Librarian, Library Academic Services Support	1
Technologist, Web Projects & Services	1
Digitization Technician	1
Staff at the Library Information Desk	12
Associate University Librarian, Learning & Research Services	1
Information Literacy and Resource Access Librarian	1
Associate University Librarian, Library Academic Services Support	1
Digital Literacy Librarian	1
Instruction and Reference Services Librarian	1
Manager, Library Information Services	1
Associate University Librarian, Collections Services	1
Library Assistant, Learning and Research Services/Technical Services	1
Library Assistant, Course Materials	1
Research Data Management Librarian	1
Archives Assistant	1
Library Assistant/Interlibrary Loans and Document Delivery	1

Prior to the implementation of the Integrated Learning Environment, AU will be reviewing the annual duties and responsibility assignments for academic staff to ensure that workloads are allocated appropriately. In the longer-term, the University will be implementing a more responsive tutor and academic expert support model. This enterprise-wide support model will ensure consistency in the student experience. These changes are part of the OneAU Transformation Initiatives ([III.C2c.01](#)).

d. provided with and utilize sufficient opportunities, resources, and support for professional growth and innovation;

AU seeks to enhance the learning experiences for all students by supporting the professional development of faculty and staff that create and deliver those learning environments. All faculty, academic experts, tutors, and professionals are encouraged to undertake ongoing professional development and are supported in doing so

through professional development leaves and funding ([III.C2d.02](#) Page 3, [III.C2d.03](#)). In addition, AU supports professional growth for all team members through a variety of ongoing activities:

- The Research Centre hosts webinars ranging in topics like grant-writing, presenting the findings of research projects and incorporating new pedagogies into courses ([III.C2d.04](#)).
- AU hosts an internal, annual Learning Conference that brings together all team members to share research, practice, and vision around teaching and learning ([III.C2d.05](#)).
- Learning Café is an ongoing forum to present techniques and practices that motivate students ([III.C2d.06](#)).
- Library Information and Digital Literacy Webinar Series ([III.C2d.01](#)), serving the entire AU Community.

e. evaluated regularly and equitably based on written, disseminated, clear, and fair criteria, expectations, policies, and procedures;

As per AU's Performance Assessment Handbook ([III.C2e.01](#)) and in accordance with collective agreements, performance management and annual assessment are important mechanisms by which team members and their supervisors discuss performance in order to ensure:

- The alignment of the employee's work effort and outcomes with their faculty/center/department objectives and the University's organizational goals;
- The alignment of the employee's behavior with competencies required for the employee and organizational success;
- Opportunities for employees and supervisors to seek and receive honest, balanced feedback in order to optimize performance and achieve positive results; and
- Provision of information to the employee about how their achievements contribute to organizational success.

The Board-AUFA Collective Agreement ([III.C2e.02](#)) lays out the bases for faculty reappointment, tenure, promotion, and annual review. These criteria speak to the institution's respect for teaching and research effectiveness. Faculty research productivity as demonstrated by conference presentations and publications in refereed journals provides evidence of their scholarly rigour.

Criterion 3.

Academic programs of study that are clearly and accurately described in official publications of the institution in a way that students are able to understand and follow degree and program requirements and expected time to completion;

As noted above, students and prospective students have multiple ways to find information about programs, courses, and policies concerning completion of courses and programs. The AU [Undergraduate](#) and [Graduate](#) Calendars including program regulations, and course syllabi are publicly available online for prospective and current learners; institutional and faculty websites provide additional information. Students may contact the AU Information Centre for more detailed information or the Counselling Services team for career planning support ([III.C3.05](#)).

Students are provided clear and transparent information on the amount of time it may take to complete each credential, assuming full-time study and no existing credit. Students with prior learning or transfer credit may reduce the time to completion. Students who choose to complete a credential on a part-time basis may extend their time to completion. Recognizing that most AU learners complete their credentials on a part-time basis, the consumer report provides information on the percentage of students that have graduated within six- and eight-year timelines ([III.C3.06](#)).

Students and prospective students have access to tools and resources to assist them in planning their personalized completion pathways. Students enrolled in a credential may use DegreeWorks ([III.C3.03](#)) which shows completed courses and identifies remaining requirements. Students and prospective students considering credentials in which they are not enrolled may use freely available program plans to plan or review completion pathways ([III.C3.04](#), [III.C3.04a](#)). Individualized support in program completion planning is available to all students through general and faculty-specific advising teams.

Criterion 4.
Sufficient learning opportunities and resources to support both the institution's programs of study and students' academic progress;

As set out in *IMAGINE* and its associated foundational plans, AU aims to provide learner-centred, quality-driven, and community-based supports to students, and to provide the tools and resources that learners require to curate their journeys and achieve their personal learning goals.

Current academic supports are provided throughout the learner journey; these services include the following:

Table 9. Academic Supports

Academic Support	Use Statistics
Counselling Services including learning readiness, career planning, educational counselling, and AU application support (III.C4.01)	7,064 contacts (for period July 1/19 – June 30/2020)
Athabasca University Undergraduate Orientation (III.C4.02 , III.C4.14)	July 1, 2019 – June 30, 2020: 7195 visitors
Course and program advising and information (III.C4.03)	Advising Services 28,374 contacts (July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020) Faculty of Business Advising 7,000 annual contacts Other faculties have advising services outside of the Info Centre.
Athabasca University Write Site (III.C4.04)	For the period of January 1, 2020 – October 6, 2020 Total Users: 406 Total Sessions: 521 New Visitors: 259 Returning Visitors: 259 Page views: 787 Write Site Drop Box statistics September 2019 to August 2020: Total Submissions: 1820 Undergrad Submissions: 1534 Graduate Submissions: 186 ESL Submissions: 442 Real-time Sessions: 129
Athabasca University Math Site (III.C4.05 , III.C4.15)	For the period of January 1, 2020 – October 6, 2020 Total Users: 8,881 Total Sessions: 12,334 New Visitors: 8,931 Returning Visitors: 3,413 Page views: 164,948
Library Services	September 1, 2019 – August 31, 2020: 1,503,816 site page views
Library Reference Services (III.C4.16)	September 1, 2018 – August 31, 2019: 684 reference requests completed: 684
Library Digital Literacy Webinars (III.C4.07)	September 1, 2018 – August 1, 2019: 3254 recording views 244 in-person attendees
Mental Health and Wellness (III.C4.08)	Homewood Health September 1, 2019 – August 31, 2020, 612 Active Cases TalkCampus since May 11, 2020 (launch) 94 students have accessed
Accessibility Services including accommodations, advocacy, and alternate format and alternate technology support (III.C4.09)	21,135 requests received (July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020)

The *Student Service Strategic Plan 2018–2023* ([III.C4.10](#)) calls for “...a reimagined and personalized welcoming program that prepares learners for their digital university experience by providing access to and information about essential tools, process, policies, and resources.” Recent student journey mapping analyses have confirmed the importance of this work ([III.C4.11](#), [III.C4.13](#)). To this end, a modernized, multimedia online undergraduate student orientation ([III.C4.02](#), [III.C4.14](#)) was implemented in July 2019. Work on welcoming and orientation needs to continue in order to enrich this initiative at the institutional, program, and course levels to prepare learners for online learning.

At the graduate level, student academic support is provided by dedicated program offices, supervisory teams for thesis- and dissertation-based students and the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS), as well as administrative offices.

Faculty-based orientation courses are also offered for graduate students. For example, the Faculty of Business orients every graduate student to their programs. The MBA, for instance, contains an online orientation that students must complete prior to taking the first course in strategic management. The content familiarizes students with the online learning environment, academic conduct, library resources, case studies, and other useful information to help students succeed in the MBA program. The orientation is paced, asynchronous, and fully online. Students learn how to access course information and materials, conduct group discussions, and how to submit assignments electronically ([III.C4.24](#)).

Doctor of Business Administration students are expected to attend an annual orientation/research conference for three sequential years ([III.C4.17](#), [III.C4.18](#)). In the first year, students learn about their program, how to succeed in it, and where to access all that they need for success across the University and within the Faculty of Business. Students in years 2 and 3 participate in the research conference, present ideas to peers in conference paper format, attend workshops for methods and other needed tools for conducting research. Since COVID-19, this orientation has been offered online.

Within the Faculty of Health Disciplines, asynchronous online courses orient Master of Counselling ([III.C4.19](#), [III.C4.20](#)) and Master of Nursing: Nurse Practitioner ([III.C4.21](#)) students. These orientation courses provide program-specific information including clinical practicum information. Additionally, there is a focus on

becoming a graduate student and the various skills required, such as library searching and using the full functions of the current Learning Management System. There is a comprehensive orientation to professional and academic writing including generating and positioning your thoughts, effectively communicating your ideas, giving credit to others for their work and structuring a paper. Successfully completing a final quiz generates a certificate of completion.

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences offers an onsite orientation to each Doctor of Education, Distance Education (EdD) cohort at the outset of the program ([III.C4.22](#)). During the week-long orientation, EdD students are introduced to their cohort, to the distance education faculty to learn about their backgrounds and programs of research, and to other information pertinent to student support and success. The orientation also includes sessions with the Research Centre and the Faculty of Graduate Studies and presents content on doctoral level research including research ethics, supervisor-student guidelines and expectations, and interim supervisor allocations. In 2020 due to COVID-19, the orientation was offered online via MS Teams, which exposed learners to this interactive, application-sharing technology used for synchronous sessions in the program.

The Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) organizes a yearly orientation day for students admitted in its graduate programs ([III.C4.23](#)). During the orientation day, students are introduced to their cohort, to FST services for graduate students, to Faculty of Graduate Studies services, and to AU Graduate Students Association. Speakers from all these units are invited to provide a presentation and answer students’ questions about their services. Students are also provided with a detailed presentation about program and course regulations and get to connect with the program advising teams. The orientation day also includes presentation about research processes, research ethics, and academic integrity issues. Library services are also invited to the orientation day to introduce the students to library services and resources. The orientation day is offered online, but it is also recorded and made available to students through the faculty website.

Criterion 5.
... at institutions that offer undergraduate education, a general education program, free standing or integrated into academic disciplines, that:

- a. offers a sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience, expanding their cultural and global awareness and cultural sensitivity, and preparing them to make well-reasoned judgments outside as well as within their academic field;
- b. offers a curriculum designed so that students acquire and demonstrate essential skills including at least oral and written communication, scientific and quantitative reasoning, critical analysis and reasoning, technological competency, and information literacy. Consistent with mission, the general education program also includes the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives; and
- c. in non-US institutions that do not include general education, provides evidence that students can demonstrate general education skills;

As an Alberta post-secondary public institution, new degree or specialization programs at AU must adhere to the requirements of the CAQC, which include alignment with the *Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework* ([III.C5.01](#)) as well as CAQC requirements for degree programs of study at the undergraduate level ([III.C5.02](#) Section 4.3.3, Page 57).

CAQC's Expectations for Design and Structure of BA and BSc degrees ([III.C5.02](#) Section 4.3.3.1, Page 58) include the following General Education requirements:

Courses in at least three areas of study: Humanities, Sciences and Social Sciences: with not less than three disciplines available in each of the three areas of study, and with a minimum of ten disciplines available in total.

A four-year baccalaureate in Arts or Science will normally consist of the following:

- a minimum of 120 credits or the equivalent;*
- a minimum of six credits in each of the three areas of study: Humanities, Social Sciences, and Sciences;*
- a minimum of 102 credits in Arts and/or Science courses;*
- a minimum of 72 credits at the senior level;*
- a minimum of three credits in each of five disciplines;*
- a maximum of 72 credits in any one discipline;*
- a minimum of 42 credits in the major. Normally 30 of the 42 credits should be at the senior level.*

Bachelor's Degrees must include the following *Canadian Degree Qualification Framework* requirements related to General Education areas:

- 1.d. *Critical thinking and analytical skills inside and outside the discipline.*
- 1.e. *The ability to apply learning from one or more areas outside the discipline*
2. *Knowledge of Methodologies and Research*
3. *Application of Knowledge*
4. *Communication Skills*
5. *Awareness of Limits of Knowledge*

All new program proposals must demonstrate conformance of the proposed program outcomes and program requirements to the *Canadian Degree Qualification Framework* ([III.C5.01](#)) requirements. The mapping process is updated periodically and reviewed during the cyclical program review process.

The *IMAGINE Learning Framework* priority outcome to develop an Institutional Outcomes Assessment Plan, including definition and assessment of institutional program learning outcomes, will provide an institutional and ongoing mechanism to demonstrate learner attainment of all learning outcomes. These include the study of values, ethics, and diverse perspectives along with all other general education requirements. See Standard V for more information.

To help students acquire and demonstrate essential skills and to draw them to new areas of intellectual experience, AU's Bachelor's Degrees must include the following Canadian Degree Qualification Framework ([III.C5.01](#)) requirements related to General Education areas: critical thinking and analytical skills inside and outside the discipline; the ability to apply learning from one or more areas outside the discipline; knowledge of methodologies and research; application of knowledge; communication skills; and awareness of the limitations of knowledge.

Criterion 6.
... in institutions that offer graduate and professional education, opportunities for the development of research, scholarship, and independent thinking, provided by faculty and/or other professionals with credentials appropriate to graduate-level curricula;

As one of Alberta's four Comprehensive Academic and Research Universities (CARU), Athabasca University offers research-based doctoral and master's programs which require dissertations or theses (respectively) under the supervision of qualified academics. The Faculty of Graduate Studies' (FGS) [Graduate Student Handbook](#) outlines roles and responsibilities, establishes criteria, and

defines procedures to ensure that learners follow clear and consistent processes and are supported by academics with appropriate qualifications. The FGS provides ongoing support and development of student research and research communication skills through initiatives for students, including opportunities to participate in an annual graduate student research conference and 3MT© (3 Minute Thesis) Competition, and to attend the FGS' Presentation and Workshop series.

Supervisors and supervisory committees are a key support for learners as they develop and demonstrate research and scholarship skills. As set out in the [Graduate Student Handbook](#), the FGS:

- sets the eligibility criteria for supervisors, co-supervisors and supervisory, candidacy, and examination committee members,
- defines the roles and responsibilities for supervisors, students, and committee members, and
- defines the processes for dissertation and thesis completion.

These requirements ensure that learners are supported by academics with appropriate qualifications and follow clear and consistent processes. All non-thesis masters' programs also include multiple opportunities for developing research, scholarship, and independent thinking through learning activities and assessment artefacts. These programs are also mapped to the scholarship requirements in the CAQC and the *Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework* ([III.C6.02](#)).

Table 10. Supervisors and Committee Members (As of October 2020)

As of Oct 6, 2020	Students	AU Supervisors	AU Committee Members	External Co-Supervisors	External Committee Members
Doctor of Business Administration (DBA)	39	21	13	19	12
Doctor of Education in Distance Education (EdD)	36	13	20	1	14
Master of Education in Distance Education (MEd)	10	3	3	0	0
Master of Science in Information Systems (MScIS)	9	8	0	0	0
Master of Counselling (MC)	17	9	0	1	0
Master of Health Studies (MHS)	8	7	0	0	0
Master of Nursing (MN)	15	14	0	2	0

In 2019, the FGS launched training for graduate supervisors to further strengthen the support provided to research-based learners ([III.C6.09](#), [III.C6.10](#)). AU's Award for Excellence in Graduate Student Supervision ([III.C6.03](#)) demonstrates the importance placed on graduate student supervision.

The FGS provides ongoing support and development of student research and research communication skills such as:

- Annual Graduate Student Research Conference (co-hosted with the AU Graduate Students Association) ([III.C6.04](#));

- Participation in the 3MT© (3 Minute Thesis) Competition ([III.C6.07](#)); and,
- Presentation and Workshop series with a strong focus on research and accessing research funding ([III.C6.05](#)).

Research opportunities are also available to learners through research assistantships.

Finally, graduate learners at AU are supported through a variety of awards ([III.C6.06](#)). The internal awards distributed in 2018–19 are shown below.

Table 11. AU Awards Distributed to Graduate Students

Award	Total Awards Given	Total Amounts of Awards
3MT Award	3	\$1,000.00
Access to Research Tools Award – AU	2	\$1,000.00
Air and Surface Transport Nurses Association Award	1	\$3,300.00
Alberta Innovates-Technology Futures	2	\$15,000.00
Alberta Indigenous Mentorship in Health Innovation	1	\$5,000.00
Alberta Registered Nurses Educational Trust Award	1	\$561.44
Allied Health Professional Development Fund	1	\$1,350.00
Alumni Rising Star Award – AU	1	\$1,000.00
Canada Graduate Scholarship	1	\$17,500.00
Canadian Counselling and Physiotherapy Association Social Justice Chapter Student Travel	1	\$350.00
Conducting Research Fund	1	\$930.00
Dissemination Award	1	\$1,800.00
Doctoral Level Student Bursaries	2	\$2,500.00
Dorothy Budneck Memorial Scholarship	1	\$792.00
Excellence in Research Scholarship Award	1	\$3,000.00
Faculty of Health Disciplines Travel Bursary	1	\$1,000.00
Graduate Level Travel Award	7	\$5,600.00
Graduate Student Access to Data Management Analysis Software Award	6	\$1,141.80
Graduate Student Research Fund	15	\$21,780.00
Graduate Student Scholarship	2	\$6,000.00
Judith Gibbons Award for Research in Culture and Gender	1	\$200.00
Kronier Family Education Bursary, Vancouver Coastal Health	1	\$1,000.00
Margaret Stainton Bursary	1	\$550.00
Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council Award	1	\$17,500.00
Outstanding Distinction Award	1	\$1,125.00
Queen Elizabeth II Graduate Scholarship	5	\$19,258.00
William and Joan Reid Scholarship	1	\$2,000.00
TOTAL	66	\$132,238.24

Criterion 7. Adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval on any student learning opportunities designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers;

Not applicable; AU does not deliver student learning through third-party providers.

Criterion 8. Periodic assessment of the effectiveness of programs providing student learning opportunities.

Program effectiveness is assessed in a variety of ways at AU. As per the *Degree Program Review Policy* ([III.C8.01](#)), cyclical program reviews occur on a five year schedule and involve the creation of a self-study that assesses areas such as admission and acceptance statistics, attrition and graduation rates, learning outcomes attainment, alumni employment and feedback and student feedback, followed by an external review and the program's response to the external review. The program response report and annual program updates arising from the program review are monitored by the Academic Programs, Planning and Priorities Committee (APPSC) ([III.C8.03](#)) of the General Faculties Council (GFC) ([III.C8.04](#)).

These program reviews are conducted according to CAQC guidelines. CAQC monitors the initial program review report for new programs and conducts cyclical audits of AU's quality assurance processes every five years. The most recent CAQC Quality Assurance Audit ([III.C8.02](#)) took place in 2018.

The currency of AU's credentials is further sustained through a continuous improvement process that comprises many different activities. Program and curriculum reviews, for example, are conducted on a regular basis, incorporating feedback received from course evaluations, developments in professional practice, and research across various disciplines. There are also many university activities, as well as structural mechanisms and policies, that facilitate this continuous improvement process, including discipline-focused meetings, program councils, faculty councils, and the use of regular data collection (e.g., internal and external surveys)

to support decision-making. Program currency is further enhanced by the ongoing process of external reviews and the development of new courses, which are created in response to potential gaps in the curriculum and evidence of student interest in an area of study. Courses are also retired as a result of this ongoing review process.

Other systems of assessing program effectiveness include benchmark surveys, curriculum mapping, annual faculty reviews of programs, institution-wide reviews of AU's course and program mix, faculty and leadership team reviews of program "health" reports, and various reviews by professional and regulatory bodies including the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (Faculty of Business) ([III.C8.05](#)), the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta Nursing Education Program Approval Committee (Nursing programs) ([III.C8.06](#)), the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing ([III.C8.07](#)) and the College of Alberta Psychologists ([III.C8.08](#)).

As AU continues its implementation of the *IMAGINE Learning Framework*, alignment of these program and course review processes to the Learning Framework will be strengthened through:

- a renewal of the program review procedures, program review website and self-study templates
- implementation of the Institutional Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan to strengthen learning outcomes assessment and the data that will inform program and course reviews, and
- incorporation of program health reports into annual program reports to APPSC to ensure a more complete picture of the program's current status.

Integrated Learning Environment

In approving the *IMAGINE Learning Framework*, the University community committed to rebuilding the learning environment and, through this commitment, envisioned a modernized design and development process. It is a plan for the design of learning experiences that are deeply integrative and purposefully aligned with learning outcomes. Integrative design connects all aspects of learning—from curriculum development to authentic assessment to community engagement—into a holistic understanding of learning as a lifelong process. To support learners' self-efficacy, we design learning experiences that are immersive and engaging, and that allow learners to connect new ideas and concepts with what is meaningful to them in their own lives.

AU will foster a coherent student learning journey by providing a suite of learning opportunities to meet the students' changing needs, goals, and interests over a lifetime. Students will be able to chart their own coherent learning journey through the seamless aggregation and accreditation of for-credit and non-credit learning experiences, courses, and programs that adhere to quality standards. Students will have the ability to curate and update the digital learning content they have found most useful in their learning journey. The access to learning content does not end when a course or program ends.

In this vision, accessibility will be built in from the beginning of the curriculum design and development process. In the *IMAGINE Learning Framework*, AU commits to the application of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles ([III.C8.11](#)).

The *IMAGINE Learning Framework* also commits to learning that learns. It moves beyond periodic review and update to continuous innovation through evidence-based, research-informed innovation, and improvement. A foundational requirement enabling a learning framework that learns is gathering accurate information about students and their learning. An example of this would be our "Re-Imagining Assessment" Sub-Committee of General Faculties Council ([III.C8.09](#), [III.C8.10](#)). This group is combining insights about our students with research on assessment, and consultation with Faculty, to develop a set of guiding principles for assessment ([III.C8.12](#)). These findings will then be operationalized through our learning design activities and also inform our selection and use of learning technologies. Ensuring intentional, formal evaluation processes with strong data will enable AU to provide the clearest possible vision of what is happening in its programs and in the design and delivery of the student learning experience and in fostering ongoing innovation.

Incorporating more experiential education in the context of asynchronous, text-based, digital learning into our courses and programs will improve learning at AU by engaging of learners in real world problems and experience. Applying experiential learning effectively into our asynchronous, text-based, and digital learning programs and courses ensure that they are relevant to students' lives, careers, and communities. For example, within the Faculty of Health Disciplines, all courses include a welcome video. Within many courses, synchronous video learning activities, such as presentation of clinical case studies, interviewing

demonstrations and return demonstration, clinical practicum debriefing sessions and active learning in areas such as managing a group counseling session, are included. The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences includes introductory instructor videos in many courses. AU-created video related to course content is also available in many FHSS courses, in addition to external video relevant to course concepts linked or streamed within courses. Learners are also involved in creating video and digital content as part of their learning and assessment where appropriate, for example, in language and communication studies. Encouraging learners to connect their learning to their lived experiences will improve the underlying learner experience and make the pedagogical approach more evidence-based, purposeful, and meaningful.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Implement the planned transformation in the Student Learning Experience ([ES.0.07](#)). AU's new Integrated Learning Environment ([ES.0.04](#)) will enable technology-based tools to facilitate proactive student support in a personal and scalable way, connecting learners to the support they need as they need it.
2. Leverage technology to create access, enhance open and distributed learning environments, and build collaborative and coordinated environments and networks to achieve coherence in the student learning experience and the synthesis of learning. The *IMAGINE* plan does not see a separation between education and the rest of a learner's life; rather, it views learners as life-long learners whose engagement with Athabasca University does not end with the completion of a course or a credential.
3. Provide graduate learners with increased research collaboration opportunities, support in research ethics processes, and increased support for research dissemination.



Athabasca
University

Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Standard IV: Support of the Student Experience

Across all educational experiences, settings, levels, and instructional modalities, the institution recruits and admits students whose interests, abilities, experiences, and goals are congruent with its mission and educational offerings. The institution commits to student retention, persistence, completion, and success through a coherent and effective support system sustained by qualified professionals, which enhances the quality of the learning environment, contributes to the educational experience, and fosters student success.

OVERVIEW

A full description and illustration of the ways in which Athabasca University meets the six criteria and all applicable sub-criteria of Standard IV, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 8 and 10, are presented here.

Criterion 1.

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates clearly stated, ethical policies and processes to admit, retain, and facilitate the success of students whose interests, abilities, experiences, and goals provide a reasonable expectation for success and are compatible with institutional mission, including:

- a. accurate and comprehensive information regarding expenses, financial aid, scholarships, grants, loans, repayment, and refunds
- b. a process by which students who are not adequately prepared for study at the level for which they have been admitted are identified, placed, and supported in attaining appropriate educational goals;

- c. orientation, advisement, and counseling programs to enhance retention and guide students throughout their educational experience;
- d. processes designed to enhance the successful achievement of students' educational goals including certificate and degree completion, transfer to other institutions, and post-completion placement;

Admission

Athabasca University follows an open admission policy ([IV.C1.01](#)) at the undergraduate level. Registration is possible for any student 16 years of age or older, who may carry any nationality and reside anywhere in the world. The efforts to promote and empower the student experience are guided by the mission statement ([IV.C1.02](#)), which emphasizes the University's dedication "to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level study and to increasing equality of educational opportunities for adult learners worldwide." Also, one of the goals stated

in *IMAGINE* is to “provide personalized and flexible opportunities that fulfill our learners’ personal goals.” In this respect, the 5-year Student Services Plan ([IV.C1.05](#)) pledges to deliver a student service where learners feel welcomed and have access to the tools that support their individual educational goals.

As noted above, AU is embarking on an ambitious plan to build an Integrated Learning Environment. The University is in a special position to serve a significant student body who would normally find traditional face-to-face institutions challenging or less convenient in the pursuit of their academic goals. The average age of undergraduate students (28 years) and graduate students (34 years) supports this observation ([IV.C1.74](#)). Based on a 2018 Graduate Student Experience Survey ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 1, Page 8), 81.3% of graduate students referred to challenges that prevented them from attending a campus-based graduate program. Employment responsibilities (49.4%) were at the top of the list, followed by family commitments (18.3%) and program availability (16.3%) ([IV.C1.04](#), Table 3.4, Page 29). 85.4% of undergraduate students work full time ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 1.9, Page 12). The AU Student Services Strategic Plan 2018-2023 ([IV.C1.05](#), Page 7) promises to foster “a student service culture that supports and adapts to our unique learners.”

The institution’s commitment to a positive student experience starts with the registration process, which is streamlined and is completed online. A new student first applies for admission ([IV.C1.07](#)) into the University and obtains a student ID. The applicant can then enroll ([IV.C1.08](#)) in a specific undergraduate or graduate program and register in courses as required by the program regulations. A significant number of students (approximately 55%, [IV.C1.75](#)) decide to enroll in specific courses without becoming program students at AU. Many of these non-degree students transfer the credit toward a degree program at other institutions. Others are non-program learners pursuing courses for personal interest or professional development, among other reasons.

Students can also contact the Office of the Registrar or faculty-based Student Advisors about course registrations. Eighty-eight percent graduate students surveyed in 2018 indicated satisfaction with the support received during the course registration process ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 9, Page 18). Undergraduate students who indicated they were completely satisfied with the time and quality of response, exceeded the benchmark of 85% -- 91.6% expressed satisfaction ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 3.4, Page 20).

Of the various reasons for joining AU, flexibility stands out for both undergraduate and graduate program students. For undergraduate program and non-program students, the availability of courses at any time during the year and the ability to study online from any location at one’s own pace were the most important factors in deciding to enroll at AU ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 1.3, Page 9). Similarly, flexible delivery is an important factor for 83% of the graduate students who attend AU ([IV.C1.04](#), Page 1 and Figure 1, Page 8).

Fees

Course fees ([IV.C1.12](#)) at AU are all-inclusive and include most learning resources and other support services (including tutorial assistance) for the period of active registration. There are variations in the fees paid by graduate students based on the program. The Graduate Student Fee Matrix clearly outlines fees by program as well as any ancillary fees. All graduate program fees are clearly identified on the Tuition and Fees webpage ([IV.C1.14](#)) and on the program-specific website ([IV.C1.66](#)).

In 2016, the University participated in the Campus Alberta Open Educational Resources Initiative, which aimed to reduce the dependence on expensive textbooks from publishing companies and promote the use of open source materials ([IV.C1.15](#)). Currently, AU offers several undergraduate courses ([IV.C1.16](#)) that are based on open source material, for which students pay a reduced learning resource fee. Knowing that these are mostly high enrollment courses, the saving transferred to students is significant. There are also graduate courses using comprehensively open-source materials. One masters’ degree has a pathway to completion using only open-source materials.

In late 2019, the Government of Alberta lifted a five-year freeze on tuition fees effective in 2020-2021 ([IV.C1.11](#)).

In response, AU implemented a 7% increase on base tuition (including program fees) for Alberta residents, out-of-province, and international students. All other unregulated fees increased by the Higher Education Price Index. For 2021-2022, Athabasca University began its tuition and fees planning with a 0% assumption; any increase proposed needed to be supported by specific initiatives of significant importance to students. Effective September 2021, AU will increase base tuition by an average of 5% ([IV.C1.09](#)). This increase will fund student priorities requiring improvement including student financial aid and

digital infrastructure. All other unregulated fees will increase by the Higher Education Price Index. As noted in Standard 2, all tuition and fee increases at AU are informed by robust tuition and price sensitivity analysis ([IV.C1.67](#)). A Tuition Affordability Framework is under development ([IV.C1.72](#), [IV.C1.73](#)).

The challenge for credit ([IV.C1.17](#)) option is another opportunity offered by AU in compliance with its mission to remove barriers. Under this option, undergraduate students can gain credit in subjects with which they are familiar at approximately half the cost of a regular course. Based on the past five years data from the Office of the Registrar, an average of 243 challenge for credit examinations are written annually ([IV.C1.25](#)).

Additional academic-related fees ([IV.C1.18](#)) are clearly itemized and listed in the [Undergraduate Calendar](#) and the [Graduate Calendar](#). Even though AU does not charge any fees for supervising Proctor U exams, most of the external invigilation centres ([IV.C1.21](#)) charge a fee that varies from one centre to another. The refund policy ([IV.C1.22](#)) is also clearly stated in the calendar. Each student has up to 30 days after officially starting the course, to change their mind and request early withdrawal ([IV.C1.23](#)). A refund of the tuition fees (less the students' union fees, the course withdrawal processing fee, and cost of course materials if not returned) is granted, provided the student did not write the final exam or submit all course requirements. Over the past five years, the Office of the Registrar processed 29,035 undergraduate early withdrawals (i.e. 6.7% of the gross course registrations).

Financial support

Based on the 2020 CUSC middle years student survey, around 73% of students were employed with a majority (69%) working over 30 hours per week ([IV.C1.24](#), Table 16, Page 11). Also, 75.9% of graduate student respondents indicated that they work full time and that their most common financial resource is employment income, followed by personal savings and financial support from employers (Graduate Student Experience Survey 2018 ([IV.C1.04](#)), Figure 11 and Table 8.4).

The Office of the Registrar's webpage includes comprehensive information on government (federal and provincial) Student Financial Assistance ([IV.C1.27](#)) available to undergraduate and graduate students through an interest-free loan program. Students can also find a list of

available scholarships, awards, and bursaries that are categorized into the doctoral, master's, and undergraduate degree levels. 84.7% of the undergraduate students surveyed in 2017 ([IV.C1.10](#), Page 31) indicated they were satisfied with the assistance received from AU staff in regard to student financial aid. Among graduate students, the satisfaction rate was even lower at 67.9% ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 9, Page 18). This is an area which requires improvement.

Academic support

AU strives to remove barriers to enrolment and puts the student in control of their educational journey. In addition to the ability to start a course on the first day of any calendar month, an AU undergraduate student can progress at their own pace and deliver course requirements at the time of their convenience without the rigidity of stressful deadlines (with the exception of clinical courses). The student can extend ([IV.C1.29](#) Section 3.6.5.12, Page 5) the 6-month contracted period for up to 12 months after the start date. In addition, a second chance to write an exam ([IV.C1.30](#)) is possible within a period of 4 months after the first attempt.

With many course materials available online through the Moodle learning management system, the student's location becomes less relevant. With access to a computer connected to the internet, registered students can progress in the course, complete online quizzes, upload assignments to the electronic assignment drop boxes, and receive marked documents anywhere in the world.

In every undergraduate course, academic help is available from a faculty member, qualified tutor, or academic expert, who can be reached online or by calling a toll-free phone number from anywhere in Canada or the US. The Faculty of Business (FOB) ([IV.C1.31](#)) and the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) ([IV.C1.32](#)) offer a modified model of support, where the majority of students' initial contact is with the staff at the Student Support Centre (for Business courses) ([IV.C1.33](#)) or the Student Success Centre (for Science and Technology courses) ([IV.C1.34](#)). These centres address administrative questions and redirect students' course content questions to academic coordinators or course professors.

The assignment and management of tutor/academic expert service for all students are provided by Learning Services Tutorial. Instructional services are provided by a variety of staff associated with different Faculties' instructional models. As

noted in the introduction, AU is currently reviewing these variations from a learner-centred perspective (IV.C1.35). In the current model, the faculty member, tutor/ academic expert is the student's main link with the institution. In addition to subject-matter assistance, tutors/ academic experts engage in scholarly discussions, mark assignments, provide feedback, and help the student prepare for exams. For any question or concern that cannot be answered or resolved by the assigned tutor/ academic expert, the student can contact the course coordinator. In the 2016 National Survey of Student Engagement (IV.C1.36, Table 4.2, Page 10), 60% of first-year (and 55% of senior) (IV.C1.36, Table 4.1, Page 16) undergraduate students surveyed, gave top ratings (very much or quite a bit) to the academic support received at AU. The same report, however, indicates (Table 4.1, Page 9) that student-to-student interaction is an area to be considered for improvement. The geographically dispersed AU students complete their courses on their own timelines through asynchronous individualized study; the Learning Framework prioritizes these connections, and AU's ILE will support and enable them at scale.

Most individualized study courses require students to write invigilated exams under the supervision of an AU-approved invigilator. This arrangement adds up to 61,518 exams written annually on average. In addition to the distribution, supervision, and collection of exams, the Examination Services Unit (IV.C1.37) maintains an exam invigilation network (IV.C1.38) that is conveniently distributed throughout the 13 provinces and territories in Canada. The student is required to undertake the examination at one of the centres if it is within 100 km of their residence. Students who live more than 100 km away from an examination centre (including international students) may write their exams closer to home after the University approves the proposed invigilator, based on clearly stated criteria and guidelines (IV.C1.39).

In line with the institution's mission to remove barriers, AU introduced the virtual invigilation (IV.C1.40) option in collaboration with ProctorU (IV.C1.41). The new service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and allows writing an online exam (IV.C1.42) from any location in the world equipped with a high-speed internet connection, while an invigilator supervises the student remotely through a webcam. Virtual invigilation is available only for exams designed to be written online. The AU website provides the student with comprehensive information starting from the exam request, through the student's MyAU

(IV.C1.43) account, and including a practice exam (IV.C1.44) using an online sample examination. The list of courses with online exams (IV.C1.45) currently includes 320 courses, and the University plans to deliver most of its exams online within the next several years. It should be noted that exams written using ProctorU have increased from 2.6% in 2016 to 19.7% in 2020. During COVID-19, 70.6% of exams are delivered through ProctorU.

Additional student services are in place to provide academic support and coaching. In particular, the Write Site (IV.C1.46) helps students improve their writing skills and provides feedback on written assignments before their submission for marking. The Math Site (IV.C1.47, IV.C1.71) also helps AU students, especially those making the transition from school-level to university-level mathematics. Undergraduate students appear satisfied with the support received for their math skills (4.0/5.0) and with the assistance to enhance their writing skills (3.9/5.0). (IV.C1.10 Table 3.7b, Page 22). 81.8% of graduate students were satisfied with the service provided by the Write Site (IV.C1.04, Figure 9, Page 18).

The majority of graduate courses are offered through the synchronous cohort-based model. However, the University also offers graduate asynchronous courses, as outlined above. In synchronous graduate courses, a faculty member, coach, or sessional instructor facilitates the course section in a virtual space in Moodle or Lotus Notes. According to the 2018 Graduate Student Experience Survey, 88% of graduate students were satisfied with their course registrations (IV.C1.04, Figure 9, Page 18), and 94% indicated that the overall quality of graduate level teaching ranged from good to excellent (IV.C1.04, Figure 2, Page 10). Access to the AU Library and Write Site is also available to graduate students. In fact, among graduate students who contacted library staff or accessed library holdings, 78% were satisfied with the quality of the service received and another 78% indicated that library holdings well supported their specializations (IV.C1.04, Page 19). Furthermore, 82% were satisfied with Write Site (IV.C1.04, Figure 9, Page 18). Graduate courses also utilize the online invigilation process described above.

Orientation, advising, and counselling

In line with the institution's mission for accessibility anywhere and at any time, automated self-contained resources are available for the dissemination of knowledge and information. For example, the undergraduate orientation (IV.C1.50,

[IV.C1.70](#)) is a user-friendly online resource designed to give a comprehensive introduction to AU and includes information essential for the student's success at the University. The resource consists of seven modules enhanced with multimedia material and covers topics on academics, technology, registration, student services, finances, achievement, and next steps. In addition, the homepage of each course includes a link to Moodle Orientation for Students ([IV.C1.51](#)), which is an informative resource, especially for first-time users of the current learning management system.

Ask AU ([IV.C1.52](#)) is another online automated system available 24-hours a day, seven days a week, where students (and potential students) can type a question in the search field, and receive the best possible response to their question. A total of 90% of the students appear satisfied with this service ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 2.1, Page 14). Students may also contact AU staff directly for assistance. The satisfaction with the assistance provided by AU staff to undergraduate students was above the benchmark of 85% ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 3.7, Page 21). Notably, 97.1% of the graduate students were satisfied with the response time received (by email or phone) from AU staff, while the satisfaction rate with the support provided to Indigenous graduate students is only 64.8% ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 9, Page 18). This is an area that requires further investigation in order to provide a more effective service to students from Indigenous communities.

The Accessibility Services (AS) office facilitates access to and aids the successful completion of AU programs and courses. The AS office works with students to provide reasonable and individualized accommodations to help them overcome barriers or challenges caused by any form of disability. Examples of accommodations include extended time to complete coursework and exams, recommendations for assistive technology, course materials and exams in alternative formats, advocacy, and referral services. Based on the Biennial Undergraduate Student Experience Survey 2017 ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 5.4, Page 32), 92.3% of the undergraduate students appear satisfied with the AS service provided. However, the satisfaction rate among graduate students is only 77.1% ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 9, Page 18). It is encouraging that AU does improve the chances for students with disabilities to earn a university degree. According to a survey focusing on the graduating class of 2015-16, 3.4% of the graduates described themselves as persons with disabilities ([IV.C1.68](#), Question 71, Page 79).

Advising Services ([IV.C1.69](#)) is available to prospective and current students at AU. Academic Advisors can assist students in many areas, including clarifying program requirements, choosing the next course in the program of studies, interpreting transfer credit evaluation, and providing information about the University's regulations and procedures. Non-program/visiting students also benefit from Advising Services, especially in the area of credit transfer. At the undergraduate level, 83.1% of the students surveyed were satisfied with the advisors' explanation of the program requirements, while 92.8% indicated they were treated with respect (Biennial Undergraduate Student Experience Survey 2017 ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 5.1, Page 30). At the graduate level, around 82% of students rated the quality of academic advising as good ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 2, Page 10).

In the fall of 2012, AU launched a comprehensive academic advising and degree audit solution program called DegreeWorks ([IV.C1.60](#)). The program retrieves the student's academic record from AU's student information system (Banner) and organizes it into an educational plan. It is a valuable tool that helps Advising and Counselling Services provide efficient and beneficial interactions with the students. The student can access DegreeWorks directly through the MyAU ([IV.C1.61](#)) portal under the "Manage your program" section. 82.0% of surveyed students indicated that the DegreeWorks tool was helpful for planning their studies ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 5.1, Page 30).

Technical support is provided by AU's IT Help Desk. In 2017, 72.4% of students indicated that they had contacted the IT help desk for assistance with email, system passwords, or other technical issues ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 3.10, Page 23); more than 89% were satisfied with the service received ([IV.C1.10](#), Table 3.11, Page 23). Improvements suggested by unsatisfied students include improving the student email system, informing students of scheduled maintenance of websites, better access to exam websites, extending hours of service and improving the response time. 73% of graduate students indicated that they never (or seldom) experienced technical issues that impacted progress in course work, and only 5.3% indicated that they frequently experienced technical problems ([IV.C1.04](#), Table 7.1, Page 34).

A team of counsellors ([IV.C1.64](#)) at AU provides services to students in the areas of educational goals and career planning. The service also extends to tools necessary for the student's success, including learning style, study skills, exam anxiety,

and time management. This confidential service is available through email or telephone. Graduate students were generally satisfied (87.2%) with the overall counselling service. However, only 75.6% of the students were pleased with the support relevant to career planning ([IV.C1.04](#), Figure 9, Page 18).

Criterion 2.

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates policies and procedures regarding evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits, and credits awarded through experiential learning, prior non-academic learning, competency-based assessment, and other alternative learning approaches.

One of AU's goals is for learners to be able to meet their changing needs through undergraduate and graduate offerings in both credit and non-credit environments and will be able to seamlessly stack these varied learning experiences into personalized learning pathways. AU's evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits help to curate the learner's journey and assist students regardless of their location. AU's approach to transferring credits is not only a timely response to learner and community needs, but it strives to improve the technologies and processes that facilitate learning and research paths of the learner.

AU continuously strives to improve policies and procedures regarding evaluation and acceptance of transfer credits, and credits awarded through experiential learning, prior learning assessment, competency-based assessment, and other alternative learning approaches. AU's goal in 2021 and 2022 is to achieve "adaptable and data-informed strategic and sustainable credential, program, and course mix that includes modularized and stackable learning outcomes in undergraduate and graduate offerings in both credit and non-credit environments grounded in the highest standards of quality and rigour" (*IMAGINE*) ([IV.C2.01](#)). Work on this initiative is underway.

Transfer of credit process

AU is a member of the Alberta Council on Admission and Transfer (ACAT) ([IV.C2.03](#)) and

British Columbia Council on Admission and Transfer (BCCAT) ([IV.C2.04](#)). AU transfer credit decisions are housed in their respective systems and available on their websites.

The University has clearly stated a list of criteria by which transfer credits are accepted. Acceptance criteria are defined in the graduate ([IV.C2.05](#)) and undergraduate ([IV.C2.06](#)) transfer credit policies. To be considered a direct equivalent, the course content must match at least 60% of AU's course content. All precedent-setting decisions are faculty reviewed. AU is receiving increased transfer for credit requests every year. In 2014, AU completed 5811 transfer credit evaluations, and by 2018 the number increased to 7687. The average wait time for transfer credit evaluations decreased considerably from 12.9 weeks in 2014 to an average of 4.5 weeks in the 2016-2018 period ([IV.C2.15](#)).

AU has implemented a variety of software solutions to improve the accuracy and efficiency of transfer credit and steadily improves the visualization of information. In 2019, the Transfer Credit Services site ([IV.C2.07](#)) was updated to a more user-friendly interface. IT Support ([IV.C2.08](#)) is currently investigating Amazon Web Services ([IV.C2.09](#)) as a potential tool to update AU internal transfer credit databases. In addition, the system (DegreeWorks) ([IV.C2.10](#)) used by AU for degree auditing is in the process of being updated.

Student experience/perspective

On their learning journey, AU students can benefit from the following transfer credit options:

- a) receive credit for successfully completed previous education (post-secondary courses, diploma or related credentials, under-graduate degree, and foreign credentials)
- b) receive credit for prior learning ([IV.C2.12](#)). In this case, the assigned mentor guides the student to develop the PLAR portfolio ([IV.C2.13](#)) for the purpose of receiving credit toward their AU undergraduate degree. The AU Centre for Learning Accreditation (CLA) guides learners through a formal process that is designed to allow them to demonstrate prior learning through work and life experiences and receive University credit ([V.C2a.11](#))
- c) successfully complete the challenge for credit option
- d) transfer AU credit to another institution

The data obtained from AU graduates in the 2018 Graduate Outcomes Survey revealed that a majority of students (91.4%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the transfer credit received ([IV.C2.11](#), Question 22, Page 26). According to the 2017 Biennial Undergraduate Student Experience Survey ([IV.C2.14](#), Table 5.1, Page 30), 83.5% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the transfer credit process was clear, and 86.2% indicated that it met their expectations.

Ad Hoc Committee for Reimagining Assessment

In June 2020, Athabasca University's General Faculties Council approved the formation of an Ad-Hoc Committee on Re-Imagining Assessment ([IV.C2.16](#), Agenda Item 3.3). The Committee developed guiding principles and recommended practices to direct the design, development, and delivery of assessment practices that are in alignment with AU's Learning Framework. The Committee grappled with questions like: What is the purpose of assessment in education? How and why do we assess student learning? Who is assessment for? Can we do assessment differently, in ways that increase access, support greater inclusion, improve learning outcomes, and enhance the experience of teaching and learning? Our answers to these questions have profound implications for how AU's Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) is designed and how AU learners are supported in their learning journeys. The guiding principles were approved by General Faculties Council in early 2021 ([IV.C2.17](#), Agenda Item 5.3). General Faculties Council also approved the continuation of the GFC Ad-Hoc Committee on Re-Imagining Assessment, in order to complete work on gathering examples in practice from AU to support these guiding principles.

Criterion 3. An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates policies and procedures for the safe and secure maintenance and appropriate release of student information and records.

Government

The FOIP Act, R.S.A 2000, c F-25 ([IV.C3.01](#)) is the core provincial legislative document that the University adheres to as it relates to Criterion 3. The purpose of the Act is to allow any person a right of access

to records under the control and custody of the University. Though the Act does not specifically supply operational procedures, it does suggest ways the University may collect personal information from individuals, and how they can access and use that information.

This Act applies to all records in the custody or under the control of AU, which is required, by provincial and federal laws, to abide by this Act and enact various policies and procedures to uphold the expected standards. The *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Regulation* ([IV.C3.02](#)) lays out procedures expected of AU when evoking the FOIP Act.

AU Policies

To better define policies that relate to the FOIP Act and comply with the FOIP Regulations, AU created a series of additional clarifying policies. The first two, *Designation of Head for the Purposes of the FOIP Act Policy*, ([IV.C3.03](#)), and the *FOIP Act Delegation of Authority*, ([IV.C3.04](#)), work together to establish the Head of the University for FOIP Act purposes as well as assigned delegates when that Head is not available. This provision allows for minimal delay in processing FOIP requests.

Another policy is *Fees for Service Under the FOIP Act Policy* ([IV.C3.05](#)). This Policy stipulates that an applicant may have to pay the University fees for service (not exceeding cost) and that an estimate must be provided to the applicant before providing the service.

Further supporting AU's commitment to safe and secure maintenance and appropriate release of student information and records, the following policies were introduced in June 2011.

1. Access to Information Policy defines how AU will provide access to recorded information in the custody and under the control of the University in a manner that supports the FOIP Act. ([IV.C3.06](#))
2. The Protection of Privacy Policy outlines how the University collects personal information about an individual. It stipulates that the information used by the University must be accurate and complete. As well, all employees collecting, using, disclosing, and maintaining personal information will familiarize themselves with the FOIP Act. It is the responsibility of the University to provide employees with available guidelines, policies, and procedures when collecting, using, disclosing, and maintaining personal information. ([IV.C3.07](#))

3. The *Records Management Policy* ([IV.C3.08](#)) ensures all information recorded while conducting University business is the property of the University. AU must establish a systematic approach for the preservation and effective management of recorded information when it is deemed to have permanent value. Threats of potential cyber security breaches requires that the University conducts regular audits to ensure systems are in place for protecting stored information. These regular audits need to include feedback from employees on the transfer of knowledge as part of the exit and onboarding process.

Principles for Ethical Use of Personalized Student Data

As Athabasca University moves ahead with realizing the *IMAGINE Learning Framework*, there are likely to be a number of innovative activities and projects that seek to use data about learners and their activities when studying with us. In response, AU's General Faculties Council struck an Ad Hoc Committee to determine principles for ethical use of personalized student data. Approved by the Council in June 2020 ([IV.C3.09](#), Agenda Item 3.2), the principles focus on:

- Supporting and Developing Learner Agency;
- Duty of Care and Obligation to Act;
- Transparency and Accuracy;
- Purpose and Scope;
- Limitations of Learner Data and Potential for Bias; and
- Culture of Continuous Improvement

The principles contained within the framework will allow a wide range of potential activities such as learning analytics implementations, automation and use of intelligent pedagogical agents, use of artificial intelligence techniques, curriculum analytics within quality assurance processes, and others yet to be defined.

Criterion 4.
An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates, if offered, athletic, student life, and other extracurricular activities that are regulated by the same academic, fiscal, and administrative principles and procedures that govern all other programs

AU is unique as Canada's Open University. The dispersed nature of its workforce and student population reflects its mostly digital presence as an online institution. Thus, the various means to engage the student body and build community occur for the most part online through the work of the AUSU ([IV.C4.02](#)) along with the efforts of a considerable number of professional staff in various student support departments and roles.

As evidence for its primarily virtual presence, AU's student orientation ([IV.C4.03](#), [IV.C4.13](#)) is entirely online. As students settle into their academic lives at the University, they will see a community of like-minded peers awaiting them. This community, however, is best accessed via the programs, tools, and advocacy that the AUSU and AUGSA provides. For example, AUSU maintains a mobile app ([IV.C4.04](#)) that provides information on courses, programs, campus services, careers and the opportunity to chat one-on-one with fellow students in real-time. The AUSU also runs *The Voice* magazine ([IV.C4.05](#)) "composed of articles created by AU students and guest writers to promote the sharing of news, ideas, opinions and valuable insights with" other fellow students ([IV.C4.06](#)). There is also a podcast ([IV.C4.07](#)) that covers a range of topics germane to undergraduate life, such as services, resources, advocacy and tips for students. AUSU is also the main portal for students seeking services related to health and mental wellness, such as pharmacy ([IV.C4.08](#)) and eye-wear discounts ([IV.C4.09](#)).

Athabasca University Graduate Students' Association (AUGSA) ([IV.C4.10](#)) is a student-run organization that aims to meet the needs of graduate students at Athabasca University. The organization provides student services and representation for AU graduate students through university and government relations with the mission that graduate-level education at AU is accessible, affordable, and of outstanding quality. AUGSA offers various services, including:

- Hosting in-person networking events for students;
- Hosting online peer-to-peer discussion forums to allow students to connect;
- Producing regular e-newsletters;
- Providing awards to graduate students, such as the Outstanding Distinction and Graduate Citizenship Awards;
- Encouraging excellence in AU faculty and non-academic staff via providing awards to AU staff who exceed in serving graduate students;
- Improving library funding for graduate research via an annual library donation;

- Offering an optional graduate health and dental plan; and
- Advocating on behalf of AU graduate students for any issue that may impact graduate student life

Another unit at AU that fosters a sense of community amongst students and alumni is University Relations ([IV.C4.11](#)), which organizes events based on specific partnerships. For example, AU is the official education partner for the Canadian Football League ([IV.C4.12](#)). As a result of this partnership, events are held throughout Canada.

Criterion 5.

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates, if applicable, adequate, and appropriate institutional review and approval of student support services designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers.

Not applicable. Athabasca University does not deliver student learning through third-party providers.

Criterion 6.

An accredited institution possesses and demonstrates periodic assessment of the effectiveness of programs supporting the student experience.

Athabasca University follows a coherent and systematic process for assessing the effectiveness of programs supporting the student experience. There are regular reviews of academic programs, support programs, resources and services offered to students. These reviews follow the provincial guidelines established by the Government of Alberta. See Standard III for additional information.

Student Service Reviews

The effectiveness of programs and services supporting the student experience is assessed annually through Integrated Resource Planning and through regular institution-level assessment and feedback strategies, such as surveys and complaint registers. Occasional internal audits of services are

commissioned, as needed. Areas for improvement are identified through these activities, and the accountability for addressing them becomes the responsibility of the unit director, who reports to the Deputy Provost, Academic Operations. The student experience is supported by the Student Services units (comprising the Office of the Registrar ([IV.C6.01](#)), Learner Support Services ([IV.C6.02](#)), the Learning Resources unit (including [Library and Scholarly Resources](#), AU Press ([IV.C6.04](#)), Learning Services Tutorial ([IV.C6.05](#)), Materials Management, and the Academic Web Unit).

Two important recent projects are aligned with the overarching goal of improving services to students: the development of a Student Services dashboard to identify ongoing, relevant metrics for student services (expected in 2021); and the launch in July 2019 of a new undergraduate student orientation ([IV.C6.03](#), [IV.C6.11](#)). The orientation includes a brief survey that will collect aggregate data regarding usage and provides information for future enhancements.

Student Perspectives

Annual assessment data relating to student perceptions of the effectiveness of programs and services is obtained through surveys of student satisfaction and feedback through Institutional Data Analysis, which reports to the Provost through the Associate Vice President, Integrated Planning and Assessment. Reports are available internally ([IV.C6.07](#)). Other surveys and focus groups of student satisfaction are conducted during the program review process, and in those faculties where external accreditation bodies, such as the College and Association of Registered Nurses of Alberta (CARNA) ([IV.C6.08](#)), the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) ([IV.C6.09](#)), the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) ([IV.C6.12](#)), the College of Alberta Psychologists (CAP) ([IV.C6.13](#)), and Chartered Professional Accountants (CPA) ([IV.C6.10](#)).

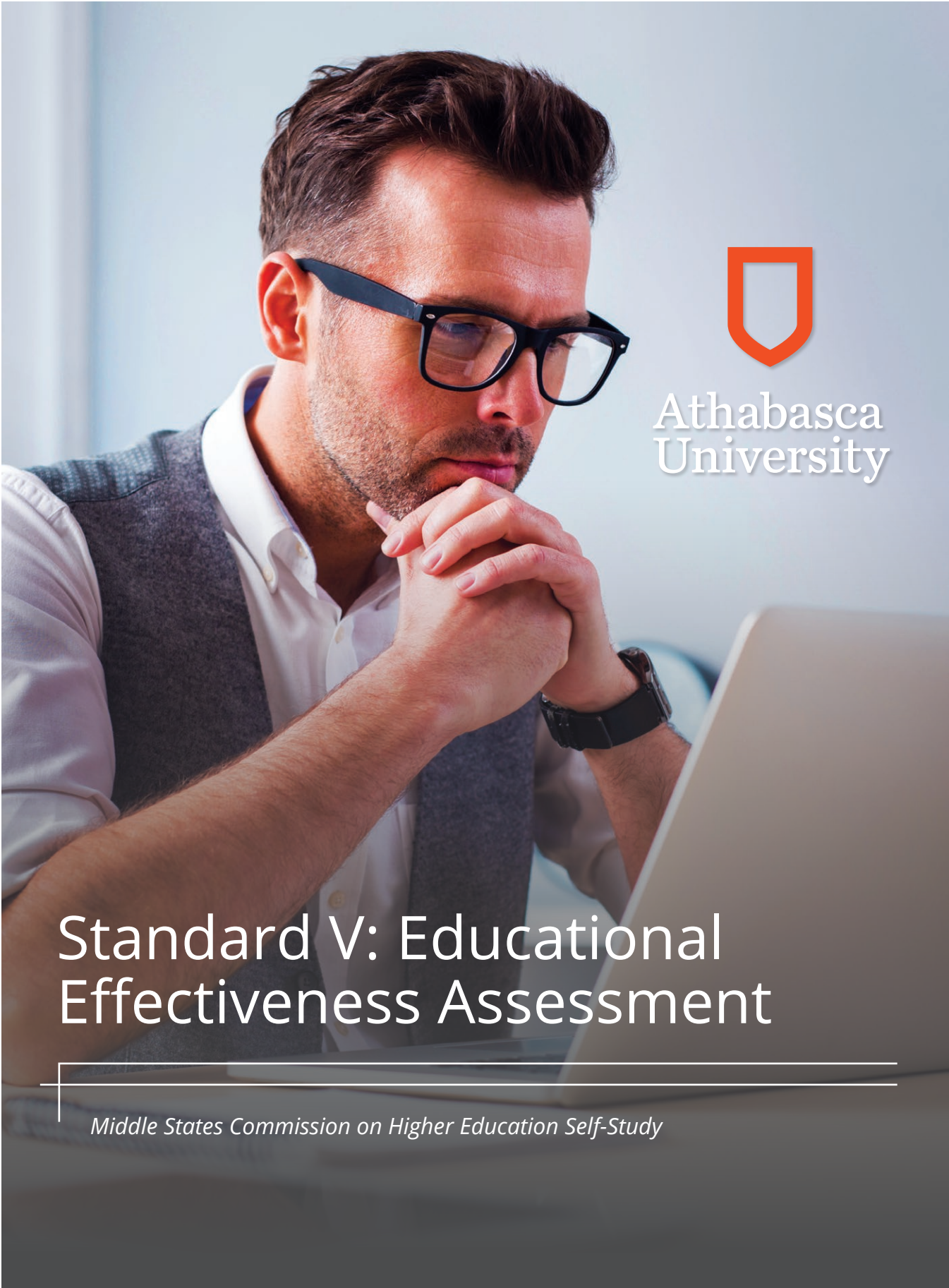
In sum, these policies, processes, projects, and requirements demonstrate that AU considers it important and is focused on integrating the results of these periodic assessment activities into ongoing improvement of the effectiveness of programs supporting the student experience.

Athabasca University has several projects in-flight to improve the student experience. To enable the ILE, the University will be centralizing graduate registrarial functions. This work will be completed in tandem with the ILE program. A OneAU Service Model dedicated to Student Navigation Services is also underway. The University has created an initial draft design based on a

holistic baseline mapping exercise completed in late 2019. A cross-institutional workshop of over 100 frontline learner support team members has resulted in the reimagining of the frontline learner experience. Workshop objectives included building a broader and deeper understanding of current challenges, highlighting opportunities to improve through innovation, and developing tactical steps to move this transformation project further. Implementation of this project is expected in 2021. Two additional OneAU Transformation initiatives (the OneAU Service Model of Learner Recruitment and the OneAU Service Model in Marketing and Communications) are in the initial design stage with expected completion in 2021–2022 ([IV.C4.14](#)).

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Establish and refine processes to ensure learners benefit from more robust and accessible financial supports from AU, including improved advice on the availability of financial supports in the form of scholarships, bursaries, grants, and research assistantships.
2. AU has the opportunity to improve Transfer Credit and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition technologies. Reducing time required for the Transfer Credit and the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition processes would further improve student experience.



Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Standard V: Educational Effectiveness Assessment

Assessment of student learning and achievement demonstrates that the institution's students have accomplished educational goals consistent with their program of study, degree level, the institution's mission, and appropriate expectations for institutions of higher education.

OVERVIEW

This section describes and illustrates the ways in which Athabasca University meets the five criteria and all applicable sub-criteria of Standard V, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 8 through 10. Requirements of Affiliation 8 through 10 will be addressed throughout the Standard. In line with Requirement of Affiliation 8, programs in all faculties are regularly and systematically assessed. Results of program assessments are shared with internal constituents as needed.

Criterion 1.
Clearly stated student educational goals, at the institution and degree/program levels, which are interrelated with one another, with relevant educational experiences, and with the institution's mission.

Athabasca University's *IMAGINE* Plan includes "an integrated planning, execution, assessment and accountability cycle" as a priority outcome for 2019 and beyond. The guiding principles for AU's *IMAGINE Learning Framework* include:

INTEGRATED. The design of learning experiences at AU is deeply integrative and tightly aligned with learning outcomes. Integrative design connects all aspects of learning—from curriculum development to authentic assessment to community engagement—into a holistic understanding of learning as a lifelong process.

FORMATIVE. Assessment and feedback at AU are formative, timely, and designed to meet learners where they are, help them to progress, and complement learning by providing a window into their ongoing progress ([V.C1.01](#)).

The *IMAGINE Learning Framework* further states that "Assessment is not simply a tool for a university to verify learning: properly integrated, it becomes an aspect of learning.... Accordingly, we commit ourselves to re-imagining assessment practices in order to expand access to learning opportunities and to enhance the learning experience."

The University has adopted the degree expectations outlined in the national degree qualifications framework endorsed by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) as the institutional learning outcomes ([V.C1.02](#) and [V.C1.03](#)). These Bachelor-, Masters-, and Doctoral-level learning outcomes guide development of new AU programs, and the regular review and continuous improvement of existing programs.

All AU programs articulate learning outcomes that align with and map to the CMEC learning outcomes, and these program learning outcomes are published on program websites ([V.C1.04](#)).

Program learning outcomes are reviewed and updated periodically for a variety of reasons: as part of the cyclical program review process; when changes occur within a discipline; when new competencies need to be added to programs; and as a result of regulatory changes. Updates to learning outcomes are initiated and approved at Program Councils, followed by approvals at Faculty Councils and at Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee.

Comprehensive curriculum maps for program- and institution-level assessments are in place for all undergraduate and several graduate programs. See Criterion 2a and b.

Criterion 2. Organized and systematic assessments, conducted by faculty and/or appropriate professionals, evaluating the extent of student achievement of institutional and degree/program goals.

As noted in Standard III, Athabasca University has a robust program review process that adheres to the Campus Alberta Quality Council's (CAQC) rigorous quality assurance standards (V.C2.01). The CAQC is responsible for monitoring the quality of approved degree programs and operates under the Alberta Government's Programs of Study Regulation (V.C2.02).

While the CAQC supports institutions in establishing comprehensive internal quality assurance

processes (V.C2.01), the primary responsibility for internal quality assurance mechanisms rests with post-secondary institutions themselves. AU internally monitors the quality of its programs and demonstrates, to the satisfaction of the CAQC, its ability to assure the quality of programs. AU has in place a program review process that involves self-study to inform future planning. The self-study procedures (V.C2.03) directly prompt program councils to reflect on and provide evidence for assessment effectiveness. AU reinforces internal quality assurance through external peer reviews conducted by independent academic experts who provide helpful third-party insights. The external response is expected to address the main points of the self-study and those provided by the external review panel. The report is also expected to inform strategies for continuous improvement. These reports are disseminated internally, and outcomes for continuous improvement are reported annually to the Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee (V.C2.04, Action Items 3.2 and 3.3).

Program reviews are scheduled through 2025–2026, as indicated in the table below (the schedule outlines anticipated review panels):

Table 12. Program Review Schedule 2019–2026

Year	Faculty of Business	Faculty of Health Disciplines	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences	Faculty of Science and Technology
2019/2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master of Business Administration 			
2020/2021			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doctor of Education in Distance Education Bachelor of Arts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Science (General, Human Science., Applied Math) Bachelor of Science Architecture
2021/2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doctor of Business Administration 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master of Science in Information Systems
2022/2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Commerce Bachelor of Management 3-year Master of Business Administration, Hockey Management (desk review) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master of Counselling Bachelor of Nursing (Post Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) and Post Registered Nurse (RN) (external; 4-year cycle) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Professional Arts 	
2023/2024		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Master of Health Studies Master of Nursing, General Master of Nursing, Nurse Practitioner (external review) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Human Resources and Labour Relations Master of Education in Distance Education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Science (all specializations except Architecture)
2024/2025			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of General Studies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bachelor of Science in Architecture
2025/2026			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doctor of Education in Distance Education Bachelor of Arts 	

A schedule of completed reviews can also be found on the Provost's webpage ([V.C2.05](#)).

a. define meaningful curricular goals with defensible standards for evaluating whether students are achieving those goals;

Athabasca University employs continuous learning outcomes assessment procedures within each faculty. As part of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation effort, Athabasca University's Faculty of Business (AUFB) has developed a process and a schedule for the evaluation of student learning ([V.C2a.01](#), PDF Pages 9–12). The Doctor of Business Administration, Master of Business Administration, and Bachelor of Commerce/Bachelor of Management programs have scheduled program-level assessments to complete a cycle of testing—evaluation—improvements—retesting—re-evaluation (“closing the loop”) in a 5-year cycle ([V.C2a.02](#)). The current cycle is for 2018–2022, and all programs have completed at least one assurance of learning (AoL) assessment and recommended program improvements. Retesting and re-evaluation are scheduled for all programs.

Documents for the AoL Committee, the Doctor of Business (DBA) AoL Committee, the Master of Business Administration (MBA) AoL Committee, and Undergraduate AoL Committee are housed in Hindustan Computers Limited (HCL) Connections communities (formerly IBM and Lotus Notes). The Faculty of Business learning designer and senior course development manager work with faculty to develop materials and report on assessment activities. The assistant to the dean, working with the AoL Committee, is responsible for maintaining the AoL files. Documents include meeting notes and agendas ([V.C2a.12](#)), program learning goals, curriculum maps, program-level rubrics ([V.C2a.13](#)), assessment reports and data sheets ([V.C2a.14](#)), schedules, and templates and instructions on the AoL process ([V.C2a.16](#)). These documents, along with various Faculty Council minutes ([V.C2a.15](#)), provide a comprehensive record of AUFB curriculum improvement activities.

Evidence of FB student preparedness is in their performance in the Alberta Deans of Business Competition ([V.C2a.04](#)) and Chartered Professional Accountants (CPA) Business Challenge ([V.C2a.05](#)) (undergraduate case competitions) and CME Group's Trading Challenge ([V.C2a.06](#)) (an undergraduate and MBA trading competition). FB courses fully or in part meet the educational

requirements ([V.C2a.07](#)) of the Association of Administrative Professionals (AAP), Appraisal Institute of Canada (AIC), Chartered Professional in Human Resources (CPHR), Canadian Institute of Bookkeeping (CIB), Canadian Institute of Financial Planning (CIFP), Canadian Institute of Management (CIM), Canadian Operational Research Society (CORS), Canadian Payroll Association (CPA), Fellow Chartered Insurance Professional (FCIP), Supply Chain Management Professional (SCMP), and Society of Actuaries (SOA).

In response to provincial (Nursing Education Program Approval Committee) and federal (Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing) accreditation requirements, the Faculty of Health Disciplines (FHD) has formal plans for student evaluation which cover most of the FHD programs. Each Program Director is responsible for approval and accreditation activity in their area. The curriculum framework consists of vision statements, a graphic representation of core processes, and accompanying description based on an accepted curriculum model. Curriculum mapping has been completed ([V.C2a.08](#)). Work is ongoing to provide a comprehensive formal evaluation plan, which includes feedback from students, faculty, alumni, and employers to guide the assessment of the curriculum, program delivery, and program outcomes; develop a clear student progress tracking plan; and apply results from the evaluation plan to program improvements.

The Faculties of Science and Technology and Humanities and Social Sciences conducted curriculum-mapping workshops with all faculty members, learning designers, and other course development and production staff. In these workshops, learning outcomes were mapped to program outcomes for all undergraduate and graduate programs in the faculty ([V.C2a.18](#), [V.C2a.19](#), [V.C2a.20](#), [V.C2a.23](#), [V.C2a.43](#), [V.C2a.44](#)). In addition, the assessment method for each of the course outcomes was mapped ([V.C2a.09](#), [V.C2a.22](#), [V.C2a.45](#), [V.C2a.52](#), [V.C2a.53](#), [V.C2a.55](#), [V.C2a.56](#)). All program outcomes map to the Canadian of Ministers of Education of Canada (CMEC) Framework.

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences staff and faculty (FHSS) have completed detailed curriculum mapping of all majors, diplomas, and certificates ([V.C2a.09](#), [V.C2a.22](#)). The curriculum mapping was led by the Associate Dean, ([V.C2a.21](#)) and supported by learning designers, who developed and offered workshops for FHSS faculty ([V.C2a.18](#), [V.C2a.19](#), [V.C2a.20](#), [V.C2a.23](#)) and worked

directly with faculty and program directors. Student evaluation is part of the general program review process in place across the institution. The Faculty of Science and Technology has also completed extensive curriculum mapping ([V.C2a.10](#)) and is taking part in the University-wide program-level assessment planning activity ([V.C2a.17](#), PDF Pages 77 and 78).

Similar to other faculties, the Faculties of Science and Technology and Humanities and Social Sciences have rigorous design and evaluation for learning outcomes assessment. At both the undergraduate and graduate levels, the course development and production teams support academics to ensure that learning outcomes are articulated, assessed, and achieved in the creation and revision of courses. These teams include learning designers, multimedia web specialists, visual designers, and editors ([V.C2a.46](#)) who all specialize in the development and production of courses; these team members also have expertise in innovative, accessible, and effective pedagogical methods for assessment. An example of the FST team can be found in the Evidence Inventory ([V.C2a.46](#)). This team approach to course design and development ensures that the students achieve the learning outcomes relevant to their disciplines, ensuring that students demonstrate the competencies expected for their disciplines across the faculties that meet provincial, national, and international standards ([V.C2a.50](#), [V.C2a.51](#), [V.C2a.54](#)).

Assessment of learning outcomes for graduate programs is completed through the home Faculties. In the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, the assessment of learning outcomes in the Master of Arts, Interdisciplinary Studies ([V.C2a.24](#)) program is complete. An initiative to refresh learning outcomes in the two graduate programs in Distance Education is also underway ([V.C2a.25](#), [V.C2a.26](#), [V.C2a.27](#)). For graduate programs, the Faculty uses the same learning outcomes assessment process as in undergraduate programs, and the same template, albeit with minor differences, is used to map initiatives in both undergraduate and graduate programs ([V.C2a.36](#), [V.C2a.37](#), [V.C2a.38](#), [V.C2a.39](#)). Program learning outcomes are achieved by successful completion of identified courses, projects, and theses.

In the Faculty of Health Disciplines (FHD), the Master of Nursing: Nurse Practitioner program is guided by external regulators and its accrediting body, the Canadian Association of Schools of Nursing (CASN) ([V.C2a.28](#)). This program maintains a record of course feedback and feeds this back into

course assessments ([V.C2a.35](#), [V.C2a.40](#), [V.C2a.41](#), [V.C2a.42](#)).

The Master of Counselling program has developed a set of disciplinary and transdisciplinary outcomes based on faculty, student, and theoretical concerns and feedback. The result is a series of tables ([V.C2a.29](#)) which are being integrated into the curriculum course by course (thus far, 15 credit-hours out of a total of 36 credit hours for the degree). An example of this integration can be found in the Evidence Inventory ([V.C2a.30](#)).

The Master of Health Studies (MHS) program and the Master of Nursing Generalist (MN: Gen) program have built their outcomes using the Canadian Degree Framework ([V.C2a.31](#)). Working from this model, the most recent MHS and MN: Gen program review summarizes the latest developments in learning outcomes, including course revisions to help foster and build writing skills early in the programs ([V.C2a.57](#)).

Faculty of Science and Technology graduate programs that are course-based follow a similar process to undergraduate programs. Learning outcomes and assessment are embedded into the course design process. Direct assessment of learning outcomes is dependent on the course and the outcome; one example is the demonstration of programming skills in a graduate level computing course ([V.C2a.47](#), [V.C2a.48](#)). The thesis-based Master of Science in Information Systems (MSc IS) program evaluates students through direct assessment methods. Students demonstrate research competencies through the completion of a research proposal, the generation of research results, writing a thesis, and the oral defense of the thesis to a committee, which includes an external examiner ([V.C2a.32](#)).

Faculties engage in indirect assessment of learning outcomes through the administration of undergraduate and graduate surveys, monitoring completion rates, and tracking student success in employment or further educational opportunities ([V.C2a.49](#), Questions 9 and 10). Student participation in focus groups or surveys during the program review process provides additional information regarding program improvement and learning outcomes ([V.C2a.33](#), Pages 9–10). Academic Experts and Tutors who help teach students and answer academic inquiries are a valuable asset in learning outcome assessment as they inform the faculty about the efficacy of assessment methods, student performance, and approaches to continually improve.

b. articulate how they prepare students in a manner consistent with their mission for successful careers, meaningful lives, and, where appropriate, further education goals;

To ensure that program learning outcomes are fully translated into program requirements, faculty and program councils create and maintain curriculum maps that demonstrate how course learning outcomes and assessments are aligned with specific program learning outcomes. As part of this process, in some faculties the program learning outcomes have been updated to reflect higher-order functioning, such as analysis, evaluation and synthesis ([V.C2b.02](#)). Curriculum maps ensure that all students, irrespective of degree program, emerge from AU with skills that require synthesis of a range of skills and knowledge. Evidence of this process could be gleaned from the 2020 survey of middle year students conducted by the Canadian University Survey Consortium, which polled students on their plans after completing their undergraduate studies. About one-third of middle year students (34%) planned on applying to graduate school and about a quarter (23%) planned on applying to a professional program. In terms of career plans, three-quarters (75%) either had a specific career in mind (41%) or several careers in mind (34%), and over three-quarters (77%) knew their career options either very well (34%) or fairly well (43%). There were also those who have already taken steps to prepare for employment or a career post-graduation as 41% worked in their chosen field of employment and 19% volunteered in their chosen field ([V.C2b.01](#), Pages 20-21). This survey process is also used, for example, in the Faculty of Health Disciplines program, as documented in the program review ([V.C2b.04](#), Section 10, Page 37).

Programs in the Faculty of Science and Technology are designed to ensure that students obtain current and relevant skills for successful careers, while also creating opportunities for reflection, critical thinking, communication, and contributing to society. International partnerships, industry research chair appointments, and direct contacts with industry help inform program outcomes and assessment that ensure students are prepared for their careers in computing science.

The Bachelor of Science in Architecture and the Graduate Diploma in Architecture, developed in partnership with the Royal Architecture Institute of Canada (RAIC), trains students for specific skills in architecture, including materials sciences and design studios, while introducing new approaches

to sustainability and green architecture. Since the RAIC has rigorous standards, outcomes and the assessment of these outcomes are focused on demonstrating the knowledge, creativity, and design skills required to be an architect, while instilling concepts of societal responsibility and the broad impacts of the built environment ([V.C2b.13](#)). The learning outcomes of the Bachelor of Science programs are standardized to ensure students have both the theoretical and practical skills needed for careers in the sciences, for acceptance into professional programs (veterinary, medicine, pharmacy) in Canada and beyond, or for continuation into a graduate degree ([V.C2b.06](#)). In addition, through an innovative combination of majors and minors, students in the Bachelor of Science programs have the opportunity to attain skills in emerging areas of science, preparing them for a changing world and an increased focus on multi-disciplinarity. Students in all Faculty of Science and Technology programs also have the opportunity to take independent study or research project courses to develop advanced skills in their discipline.

The learning outcomes and assessment methods for Faculty of Science and Technology programs are evaluated by faculty and staff, by students (through evaluations, institutional surveys ([V.C2b.08](#), [V.C2b.09](#)), focus groups), through reference letter requests (for program applications and research awards), through program reviews, and through the extensive transfer credit agreements in place with institutions across Canada and beyond ([V.C2b.07](#), [V.C2b.14](#)). After they complete their programs and move on, student success is also monitored.

Consistent with degree expectations as prescribed by the CMEC ([V.C2b.05](#)), the program outcomes for the bachelor-level degrees prepare students for both employment and further study by providing intellectual improvement as well as personal advancement.

The Faculty of Business has followed its strategic vision – *The Difference Makers* ([V.C2b.23](#)) to prepare its students for success in their career pursuits, meaningful lives, and further their education goals. The Faculty has established a mature AoL system for its Bachelor of Commerce, Bachelor of Management, Master of Business Administration, and the Doctor of Business Administration programs, building on the principle of continuous improvement in curriculum development and management, course development, and revision. The AoL system has informed a number of significant improvements, including the merger

the 4-year Bachelor of Management program and 4-year Bachelor of Commerce program into one Bachelor of Commerce program, the introduction of ADMN405 as a capstone course with virtual coop to students, and the introduction of Artificial Intelligence to the ADMN233 course. Faculty members have become more proactive in curriculum and course design, delivery, and pedagogical research. The faculty not only delivers high quality programs to its student body but has also put great efforts in having its business programs accredited and/or recognized by professional bodies including Chartered Professionals in Human Resources of Alberta (CPHR) Alberta ([V.C2b.24](#)), the Supply Chain Management Association (SCMA) ([V.C2b.25](#)), and the Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC) ([V.C2b.26](#)), among others.

The faculty has been innovative in program development and delivery. For example, two new MBA specializations (Digital Business Transformation and Strategic Leadership and Change) are in the development and once approved will meet the changing needs of the business world. Another example of program delivery excellence is found with the successful launch of DBA program's student research conference and workshop delivered virtually pulling doctoral students from different cohorts and multiple locations to one virtual place.

Course Surveys

Upon completion of each course at Athabasca University, students complete a questionnaire to provide feedback on the course design, course delivery, and pedagogical strategies used in the course ([V.C2b.08](#), [V.C2b.09](#)). Feedback from the students is used to make ongoing revisions to courses. Major revisions are reviewed by the program councils ([V.C2b.10](#), [V.C2b.11](#), [V.C2b.12](#)). For example, the Faculty of Business has established and published processes and forms ([V.C2b.18](#), [V.C2b.19](#), [V.C2b.20](#), [V.C2b.21](#), [V.C2b.22](#)) used during course development and production (CDP) which specifically reference use of course evaluation surveys as part of course revision considerations. Data from these surveys are found in the Faculty of Business Course Development Resources Community ([V.C2b.16](#)). All the overarching documents demonstrate the ongoing continuous improvement model, as do formal policies for revision development at both the graduate and undergraduate level ([V.C2b.17](#)).

Independent of survey questionnaires built into courses, some programs conduct online surveys to capture student feedback more comprehensively. One example is in the Graduate Diploma in Legislative Drafting program in FHSS ([V.C2b.03](#)), in which faculty administer an online survey to all current students and graduates of the program: "The resulting findings are directly applicable to several...conference themes, including the impact of new technologies on legislative counsel, how to employ technologies and design pedagogies that that allow legislative counsel to keep up to date and, most centrally, how to design and develop legislative drafting training materials that meet the specific legislative counsel."

c. support and sustain assessment of student achievement and communicate the results of this assessment to stakeholders.

In 2018, a comprehensive collection of institutional business and technical requirements to guide the acquisition of a learning outcomes assessment software to support the sustained assessment and reporting of student achievement led to the development of a business case for a Program Assessment Data Management System ([V.C2c.01](#)). The business case was approved by the Digital Governance Committee in June 2018; however, the timing of the adoption of a learning assessment software was dependent on the finalization of the then-emerging Learning Framework.

The development and implementation of an Integrated Learning Environment (ILE) that has evolved out of the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* has resulted in a resequencing of the learning assessment software adoption. The ILE enables the Learning Framework, which explicitly commits to outcomes-based curricula. Athabasca University remains committed to an infrastructure for learning outcomes assessment (LOA) and sees opportunity to design cohesively LOA infrastructure that is intrinsic to the ILE.

Criterion 3. Consideration and use of assessment results for the improvement of educational effectiveness. Consistent with the institution's mission, such uses include some combination of the following:

- a. assisting students in improving their learning;
- b. improving pedagogy and curriculum;
- c. reviewing and revising academic programs and support services;
- d. planning, conducting, and supporting a range of professional development activities;
- e. planning and budgeting for the provision of academic programs and services;
- f. informing appropriate constituents about the institution and its programs;
- g. improving key indicators of student success, such as retention, graduation, transfer, and placement rates; and,
- h. implementing other processes and procedures designed to improve educational programs and services.

Assisting Students in Improving Their Learning

As an online education institution with respected graduate programs in distance education ([V.C3.01](#)), AU has applied sound instructional design theory to course design from its beginning in 1970. The social and technological changes that began with the personal computer have demanded a response from all post-secondary schools, but especially AU as an open online university. In addition to careful design of the online learning environment, AU has created student support services uniquely adapted to online learners.

For example, the Faculty of Business has a mature online student support and advising system ([V.C3.29](#)). Bimonthly reporting to the FB Faculty Council includes a record of SRM (student relationship management) requests broken down by origin, type, and course. This system enables a timely response to patterns of difficulty for students in undergraduate courses or needed improvements in service ([V.C3.02](#), Standing Report 5.12, PDF Pages 17-30). The types of inquiries are routed to the appropriate staff member; front-line staff handle procedural questions, and faculty and Academic

Experts receive and respond to academic questions. The Faculty of Science and Technology adopted the online SRM system used by AUFB in 2018 and has been steadily growing in capacity. The Faculty of Health Disciplines and The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences employ a tutor model, in which each learner is assigned a tutor who provides individualized academic support. As noted previously, AU will be implementing an enterprise academic support model in the future.

In addition to support from a faculty member, a tutor, or an Academic Expert, students also have access to program advisors who provide assistance in program planning. Students are also provided with information about student services and have access to orientation and library resources. For graduate students, the Faculty of Graduate Studies offers webinars, resources for students, and assistance for student enrolled in thesis-based programs ([V.C3.43](#)).

AU has increasingly invested in bringing effective instructional and user experience design to its online learning environment. The University is currently engaged in implementing the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* ([V.C3.03](#), Action Item 3.1). At an institutional level, the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* articulates the aim to continuously improve and innovate how we design, deliver, support, and assess all aspects of learning. It draws attention to the transformational impact of learning, defining it as a lifelong journey that shapes our capacity to learn and grow by applying knowledge to life.

The values promoted by the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* recognize the “four pillars” of learning articulated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): *learning to learn, learning to do, learning to be and to become, and learning to connect* ([V.C3.04](#)). The transformational curriculum promoted by the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* is based on an active approach to learning; it recognizes learners’ self-efficacy to choose and achieve outcomes. The focus is then on designing engaging and immersive learning experiences to allow students to connect new ideas, concepts, and knowledge with what is meaningful to them. This approach includes collaborative learning environments to develop learners’ human capacities and skills, recognizing all types of interaction among learners and with instructors, content, the community, and the industry, which expand and enrich learning experiences. It also embraces timely and formative feedback and assessment to support students in their ongoing progress. The *Learning Framework* is

open in that it welcomes all learners and supports them with data-informed services for a better understanding their personal and professional needs and progress. AU has taken concrete steps towards better use of data in the service of learning by moving its online courses to cloud-based Amazon Web Services. As noted throughout the Self-Study, AU has laid the groundwork to adopt technology for an integrated learning environment in 2021 to support the Learning Framework goals.

In alignment with the institution's *Learning Framework*, the AU community engages in continuous assessment and curriculum improvement with the goal of improving learning. This joint effort is informed by AU's Undergraduate Course Review Policy ([V.C3.05](#)), the Course Development Policy ([V.C3.06](#)), and the Course Development Procedures ([V.C3.07](#)). These policies and procedures provide guidelines for continuous improvement and annual review of undergraduate and graduate courses to keep them up to date, pedagogically sound, and aligned to program learning outcomes and AU's academic quality standards; they ultimately provide students with quality learning environments and experiences. As noted previously, the OneAU Learning Experience Design initiative and the OneAU Learning Experience Production initiative will transform these processes to further enhance the student experience ([V.C3.42](#)).

The course revision process involves the assessment of the instructional effectiveness of the learning environment and associated learning materials. Data is collected from several sources such as students, program reviewers, student support centres, help desks, faculty, tutors, Library and Scholarly Resources, and Course Materials Production. Undergraduate student input is incorporated in the assessment process through the Course Satisfaction Survey ([V.C3.08](#)), which is embedded in the learning management system for online courses. Students are granted access to the survey when they have completed two-thirds of their course. Access to surveys is closed once the final grade is entered. Twice a year, data reports are created and sent out to various groups—tutors, coordinators, centre chairs, deans, and course designers—with the aim of informing course revisions ([V.C3.40](#), [V.C3.41](#)).

In 2019, a committee of graduate academics, professionals, and administrators was formed to update and assess the graduate course evaluation

survey to better reflect an expanded variety of learning assessments now available. It also strove to create a more unified approach to course evaluation across faculties to facilitate analysis of the data collected ([V.C3.09](#), Discussion Item 3.1). This committee will also work on redesigning the existing form to better capture student satisfaction with their courses, resources, and instructors at AU.

Improving Pedagogy and Curriculum

Pedagogy

As noted above, the AU Course Development Policy ([V.C3.10](#)) sets out a team-based approach to course development led by a faculty member (as the subject-matter expert) and co-determined by a development team including librarians, copyright officers, editorial staff, multimedia web specialists, visual communications designers, and learning designers. This policy is formalized in refined course development procedures and practices in each faculty.

New courses are reviewed before approval by the faculty program councils and are evaluated for content, learning outcomes, and assessment methods. As noted above, existing courses are continuously monitored through student evaluations, direct feedback from students, tracking of the efficacy of assessment methods by faculty, tutors, and academic experts, and through the analysis of completion rates.

These course development and review processes recognize that a coherent learning experience is dependent on not only strong academic content and rigour, but also on strong pedagogy, clear course presentation, and aligned student services. A team-based approach to course development brings subject matter experts together to affect this outcome. For example, the Faculty of Health Disciplines uses a team approach to course development. Every course team is populated by a course leader, a Subject Matter Expert, and a member of the faculty learning environment team. The process is monitored by the Associate Dean, Curriculum and Learning. Normally, a team takes student feedback and instructor feedback and works through an (ideally) 13-week process of rewriting. FHD has also developed a framework for course development that guides authors and designers toward disciplinary and transdisciplinary outcomes ([V.C3.44](#)).

Curriculum

Framing curriculum improvement initiatives, Athabasca University has adopted the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework, Procedures and Standards for Degree Programs Quality Assessment and the Procedures and Standards for Assessing New Degree-Granting Institutions set through the National Degree Qualifications Framework ([V.C3.11](#)), endorsed by the Council of Ministers of Education of Canada, ([V.C3.37](#)), and provincially defined in the Alberta Credentials Framework ([V.C3.12](#)). This framework identifies the foundational expectations for general education in the Canadian university system; it also guides and informs the design of institution-level goals, the creation of new programs, and ongoing curriculum review of new and existing programs. Program directors, faculty members, and learning designers participate in this effort to identify, design, and align high-level degree expectations, program learning outcomes, course learning outcomes, learning environments, and assessment strategies.

In the fall of 2018, the Faculty of Science and Technology conducted a revision and renewal of the curriculum maps of all their programs employing the MSCHE guidelines and standards ([V.C3.23](#), [V.C3.26](#)). In 2019, professors in the Bachelor of Science in Computing and Information Systems program conducted a mapping exercise with the aim of improving the design of the program, identifying assessment strategies, and determining how program learning outcomes are assessed. Subsequently, they mapped the whole program to align all courses to the Program Learning Outcomes (PLOs) (example [V.C3.24](#)); they identified the direct and indirect types and levels of assessment, the role of courses in the program, professional competencies reinforced in courses, and their alignment to the Alberta Credentials Framework ([V.C3.11](#)). The Master of Science in Information Systems was also mapped with an emphasis on aligning course learning outcomes to PLOs. Analysis of assessment results allowed professors to identify actions for curriculum improvement such as increased support for graduate students completing a thesis project ([V.C3.27](#), [V.C3.28](#)).

In Bachelor of Science programs, course learning outcomes align with program-level learning outcomes. Where gaps in what is offered exist, course offerings are adjusted to ensure that the requisite outcomes are delivered. In the Bachelor of Applied Math program for instance, learning outcomes mapping showed a need for courses that cover real analysis, numerical

analysis, and dynamical systems. In response, MATH 350, Numerical Methods, was approved by FST Faculty Council and will open in July 2021 ([V.C3.39](#)). Additionally, course offerings may also be adjusted so that certain learning outcomes are not overrepresented at the expense of other requisite outcomes. This process allows superfluous content to be eliminated. Regarding assessment methods used to evaluate student attainment of the expected outcomes, the Faculty is in the process of examining differences between assessment methods (direct and indirect) in courses that have high pass rates and those that have lower success rates. Assessment methods used in courses with low pass rates can be appropriately revised, if warranted.

As part their strategic plan, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences committed to mapping the curriculum of its programs with the aim of identifying gaps, misalignments, overlaps, and areas of opportunity for curriculum improvement. In 2018 and 2019, led by the Associate Dean and in collaboration with Learning Designers, FHSS faculty completed curriculum-mapping activities that involved all majors, diplomas, and certificates. The emphasis of the mapping activities has been on identifying and aligning course learning outcomes to PLOs, which in turn are aligned to the Alberta Credentials Framework standards. Professors identified indirect and direct types and levels of assessment in their programs ([V.C3.14](#), [V.C3.33](#)). Currently, FHSS learning designers are preparing the data collected during the curriculum-mapping process to facilitate data analysis. The goal is to produce a set of charts as a visual resource for faculty to analyze the emphases and balance of their programs, as well as to identify overlaps, misalignments, and gaps, to analyze the learning journey students follow throughout the program, to assess the integration of professional skills into the curriculum, to diversify the types of assessment across the program, and to identify areas of opportunity for curriculum improvement ([V.C3.15](#)).

The Faculty of Health Disciplines is committed to improving learning outcomes assessment. In the summer of 2020, the faculty hired a governance officer whose main role is to prepare and gather any and all program changes as discussed in formal program councils and at the Faculty level. This ongoing project will see better archiving and access to the records documenting changes made to programs and curriculum, based on the various feedback mechanisms currently in place. Over time, the governance officer will work

backwards to ensure that historical documents are slowly integrated into a permanent repository. As programs renew and revise curricula, they are shifting assessment criteria towards an accounting of competencies, especially for those regulated programs that have to show student competence upon exit.

At the institutional level, AU's Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Plan ([V.C3.45](#)) outlines a modern approach to curricular renewal and emphasizes aligning AU's strategic directions with program demands from both employers and students. AU's SEM approach is therefore not static, but rather a cyclical process which involves detailed monitoring of student success throughout their learning journey as well as the success of the programs AU offers to these students.

Reviewing and Revising Academic Programs and Support Services

As noted above, Athabasca University adheres to the Campus Alberta Quality Council's (CAQC) quality assurance standards ([V.C3.12](#)), and employs a program review process that involves self-study to inform future planning. AU reinforces internal quality assurance through external peer reviews conducted by independent academic experts who provide helpful third-party insights. The external response is expected to address the main points of the self-study and those provided by the external site visit. The report is also expected to inform strategies for continuous improvement ([V.C3.30](#), [V.C3.31](#)). These reports are disseminated internally, and outcomes for continuous improvement are reported annually to Academic Planning, Policy, Standards Committee (see example, [V.C3.17](#), Action Items 3.2 and 3.3, [V.C3.53](#)).

In addition to the above, in the process of completing the SEM Plan, AU reviewed student services and ties to the student learning journey. Both graduate and undergraduate journey mapping was conducted in the past three years, identifying specific points of intervention to assess different kinds of students throughout their journeys ([V.C3.46](#), [V.C3.47](#)).

In 2019 a final report from the Academica Group addressed student service culture at AU ([V.C3.48](#)), identifying several ways of improving the student experience specific to both undergraduate and graduate students. Both the student journey mapping and student service reports were used in the development of AU's Foundational Plans.

Professional Development

AU professional support staff, many with advanced degrees and training, arrange and offer professional development opportunities related to course design and development for faculty. Deans and program directors also invite speakers for special events.

The Faculty of Health Disciplines holds a professional development day three times a year during their faculty-wide meetings. Guest speakers on innovations in education, learning design, and educational technology are invited from time to time. The instructional design staff led training for faculty members in 2019 and 2020 ([V.C3.38](#)). FHD also has an online course dedicated to the course development resources available for faculty ([V.C3.32](#)). It serves as repository for procedures and other helpful learning design resources.

In addition to the intensive workshops in program- and course-level mapping exercises for faculty, noted above, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences also holds annual Planning, Pedagogy and Research Symposia ([V.C3.36](#)). Keynote speakers on innovations in education, learning design, and educational technology are invited, and faculty also share current research in educational innovations and pedagogy, both theoretical and applied.

A Faculty of Science and Technology workshop on learning design for faculty took place October 31– November 1, 2018 ([V.C3.25](#)), and the workshop on mapping learning outcomes between courses and programs in September of 2019 ([V.C3.13](#)). In 2020, the FST launched a Global Studio Lecture Series ([V.C3.34](#), [V.C3.51](#)), the RAID (Research and Information Discussion) ([V.C3.52](#)) sessions, and the Learning Café ([V.C3.49](#)). These regular sessions focus on online pedagogical approaches and feature guest speakers on various topics related to digital education ([V.C3.54](#)).

The Faculty of Science and Technology hosts regular course development workshops in which faculty share best practices. Faculty also share pedagogical approaches, innovations in course delivery, and host presentations at faculty meetings ([V.C3.50](#)). All faculty members are invited to these events.

The Faculty of Graduate Studies has recently partnered with Memorial University of Newfoundland to deliver online professional development (PD) opportunities for AU and MUN graduate students. These are primarily in the form of workshops and webinars. The institutions are working together to develop a formalized online

professional development suite of online courses in priority areas. Priority areas of PD have been identified by an FGS PD working group working with AU graduate students, drawing upon internal surveys and external surveys such as the Graduate Outcomes Survey and the Graduate Student Survey (V.C3.55).

Learning Conference

The annual Learning Conference is another important institutional initiative with the aim of improving pedagogy and curriculum. This conference allows AU faculty, students, tutors, and professional and support staff to disseminate, discuss, and celebrate research projects, successful learning, best teaching and learning practices, and student service initiatives that strengthen the AU community connections, move the University forward, and improve and innovate teaching and learning practices. The 2019 conference (V.C3.18) topics included modernized learning environments, course design processes, learning technologies, universal design for learning, and learning outcomes. The AU community considered the future of digital learning opportunities, new pedagogies, standards for enhanced learning environments, and improved accessibility for all learners to support collaborative work, dynamic communities of learning, lifelong learning, and a generally improved learning experience for AU students.

Planning and Budgeting for the Provision of Academic Programs and Services

As outlined in Standard VI, in 2018, AU embarked on an inaugural cycle of integrated planning. Ongoing assessment, a central pillar of integrated planning, is what helps the institution to determine whether it is on the right track or if any adjustments or corrections are needed at the strategic and operational level. Integrated planning, as an ongoing process of continuous assessment and improvement, allows AU to align the institutional priorities with its institutional resources by establishing the academic and administrative priorities, the allocation and relocation of resources consistent with institutional goals, and a rapid response to both opportunities and challenges (V.C3.35).

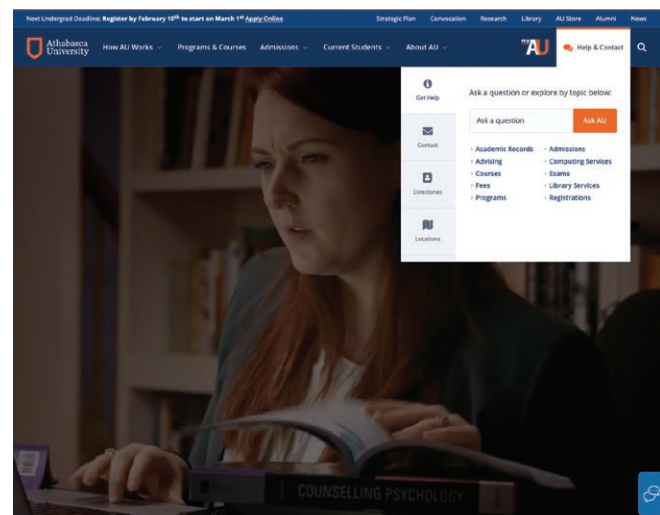
Informing Appropriate Constituents about the Institution and Its Programs

The Office of the Vice President, University Relations is responsible for communications and community relations, development and donor relations,

prospective student relations, and professional and corporate relations. As an online University, AU places considerable resources onto its [website](#) as a major communication vehicle. The strategic plan, convocation, research, library, alumni relations, and general news links are featured on the website as well as on a mini communication portal (Figure 3). The AU President and representatives of the various faculties regularly travel to face-to-face events across the country to meet current and prospective students and attend international meetings and conventions to “tell our story.”

Faculties work closely with University Relations to engage students, promote events, and celebrate achievements on the Hub (the Athabasca University news link) and on social media. Faculties are particularly interested in expanding communications with students, promoting programs, enhancing research and teaching achievements through partnerships, and celebrating student success.

Figure 1: AU Online Communication



Improving Key Indicators of Student Success

Data on retention, graduation, transfer, and placement rates is collected by the AU Institutional Data Analysis office. The *Biennial Undergraduate Student Experience Survey* for 2017 (V.C3.56) provided extensive recommendations on improving the AU website, registration services, technical support, and the student educational experience. The past five years have seen concerted efforts to address these concerns, culminating in the major initiative *IMAGINE: Transforming Lives, Transforming Communities* (V.C3.20).

The *Graduate Outcomes Survey* ([V.C3.21](#)) also provides data and guidance for continuous improvement efforts, which are reflected in the Faculty of Graduate Studies Strategic Plan 2018–2022 ([V.C3.22](#)).

Faculties are dedicated to continuous improvement and focusing on strategies to increase retention and graduation rates. The FST recently formed a working group separate from the program governance committees that is dedicated to increasing enrolments, retention, and completion in STEM programs, as well as creating new innovative programs to attract students. This provides thorough consultation, collaboration across the faculty, and a continued focus on improvement and student success.

Other Processes and Procedures to Improve Programs and Services

AU utilizes a number of survey instruments to collect regularly data that informs improvement of programs and services.

Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS): Every two years, Alberta Advanced Education (AE) commissions a survey of post-secondary graduates in order to collect information that will inform strategic planning and results reporting regarding graduate demographics, satisfaction, financing of education, outcomes, and changes over time.

Canadian University Survey Consortium (CUSC): The mission of the CUSC is to assess the Canadian university experience by surveying representative student populations enrolled in participating universities.

Canadian Graduate and Professional Student Survey (CGPSS): Administered triennially by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies, the CGPSS contains a wealth of information about graduate student satisfaction and experience.

Criterion 4. Adequate and appropriate institutional review and approval of assessment services designed, delivered, or assessed by third-party providers.

Not applicable; Athabasca University does not deliver student learning through third-party providers.

Criterion 5. Periodic assessment of the effectiveness of assessment processes utilized by the institution for the improvement of educational effectiveness.

Following an initial Quality Assurance Pilot Project which was completed in 2013 ([V.C5.03](#)), Campus Alberta Quality Council (CAQC) launched the CAQC-CARI Quality Assurance Audit Process Second Audit (2019) ([V.C5.01](#)). The second audit was “designed to audit the internal quality assurance processes” of Athabasca University and comprised an Audit Team visit and summary report, which determined the following:

The audit team finds that Athabasca University has a strong quality assurance process in place for internal review of its degree programs; we fully expect that the process will meet the Minister’s expectations. We also find that AU does indeed apply QA processes to its degree programs and makes every attempt to address the findings of the reviews appropriately ([V.C5.02](#)).

In support of the University’s *IMAGINE* Plan, evaluation processes occur as part of AU’s integrated planning cycle. As described in Standard VII, the University actively engages in assessment of its assessment processes to help inform improvements in effectiveness. Results of these assessments have routinely been used for reporting purposes and to improve operations and academic and non-academic assessment processes. As AU expands and deepens its culture of assessment, completed assessments will be maintained.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Design an institution-wide Learning Outcomes Assessment infrastructure that supports the emerging Integrated Learning Environment



Athabasca
University

Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Standard VI: Planning, Resources, and Institutional Improvement

The institution's planning processes, resources, and structures are aligned with each other and are sufficient to fulfill its mission and goals, to continuously assess and improve its programs and services, and to respond effectively to opportunities and challenges.

OVERVIEW

A full description and illustration of the ways in which Athabasca University meets the nine criteria of Standard VI, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 8, 10, and 11, are presented here.

Criterion 1. **Institutional objectives, both institution-wide and for individual units, that are clearly stated, assessed appropriately, linked to mission and goal achievement, reflect conclusions drawn from assessment results, and are used for planning and resource allocation, and Requirement 8 (Systematic Evaluation of All Programs), Requirement 10 (Institutional Planning)**

Athabasca University's *IMAGINE* Plan ([VI.C1.01](#)) sets the strategic direction for operational and capital planning and drives resource allocation. AU has been successful in managing and aligning its planning, resource allocation, and assessment processes to ensure that the University's priorities are accomplished. Since the launch of *IMAGINE*, AU has successfully supported major improvements and institutional priorities ([VI.C1.02](#), [VI.C1.03](#)).

As outlined in Standard I, AU's *IMAGINE* plan is a growth plan. The institution is undertaking transformational institutional change ([VI.C1.26](#)). AU recognizes that there are unprecedented opportunities for innovation, leadership, and collaboration in online learning. To this end, the University has been successful in managing and aligning its planning and resource allocation processes to ensure that its strategic directions and priority outcomes are accomplished.

AU's Strategic Plan serves as a vehicle for advancing the University's mission and vision. Through its strategic directions and priority outcomes, the Plan exemplifies the University's mission, vision, and values with emphasis on teaching and learning success as well as research and development success, culminating in AU success. These broad goals inform AU's strategic directions and priority outcomes from 2019 through 2023 ([VI.C1.04](#)).

Developing of the Plan was an inclusive and iterative process. The Plan development was led, supported, and stewarded by a Working Group and Steering Team and included broad representation of faculty and staff from the University ([VI.C1.05](#)). To ensure transparency and university-wide involvement in its development, the Plan was further vetted, discussed, and refined with input from the campus community through community-wide consultations ([VI.C1.06](#)).

The goals and objectives of the Strategic Plan were informed by:

- Extensive engagement, analysis, and planning by the University between 2015-2017 (Task Force [\(VI.C1.07\)](#), Educational Review [\(VI.C1.08\)](#), Business Process Review [\(VI.C1.09\)](#), Independent Third-Party Review [\(VI.C1.10\)](#);
- Faculty strategic planning and accreditation activities and undertaken both internal and external reviews [\(VI.C1.11\)](#); and
- A thorough review of the literature regarding student and institutional success.

The Plan was unanimously endorsed by GFC on November 14, 2017 [\(VI.C1.12\)](#), Agenda Item 3.1) and approved by the BoG on December 15, 2017 [\(VI.C1.13\)](#), Agenda Item 7.1).

To be effective, the President recognized the need for a fully integrated cycle of planning, implementation, measurement, and accountability. To that end, the University developed an Integrated Planning Framework [\(VI.C1.14\)](#). Developed in April 2018, this framework outlines a cyclical, ongoing process designed to advance the University's priorities and lead to continuous improvement.

Integrated planning has introduced a strong element of openness to AU's resource planning process and is central to the successful implementation of the *IMAGINE* Plan.

Integrated planning

- aligns institutional priorities with institutional resources through the establishment of annual institutional planning priorities to ensure resource allocation across the University is consistent with the objectives of *IMAGINE*;
- sets the foundation for assessing and understanding the current and future needs of faculties and administrative units across the institution by providing a comprehensive view of resources and commitments to ensure the alignment of resources with academic priorities;
- supports Athabasca University's execution, assessment, and accountability cycle; and
- enables AU leaders, teams, and individuals to respond rapidly to opportunities and challenges with a lens to continuous improvement through enhanced coordination and use of resources

The following documents were developed to set the stage for integrated planning at AU:

- Provost's Paper on Integrated Planning (April 2018) [\(VI.C1.15\)](#)

- Integrated Planning Framework (April 2018) [\(VI.C1.16\)](#)
- Integrated Planning Calendar (April 2018) [\(VI.C1.17\)](#)

In 2017, stewardship of Integrated Planning became the responsibility of Administrative Council. Administrative Council brings together key administrative leaders to operationalize integrated planning and assessment cycles in service of Athabasca University's *IMAGINE* Plan. The Council is chaired by the Provost and Vice President Academic and consists of all Vice Presidents, Associate Vice-Presidents, Deputies, the Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), Chief Internal Auditor, University Secretary, University Librarian, Deans of each Faculty, the Registrar, Directors, the Manager, Research Services, and the Manager, Financial Planning and Budgets. Meetings are held monthly [\(VI.C1.18\)](#).

As the administrative complement to formal academic committees, the Council supports effective bicameral governance at the University. By promoting inter-divisional and cross-portfolio communication and information sharing, Administrative Council offers a forum for key administrators to develop common understandings of institutional priorities, and to collectively identify, address, and develop solutions to resolve shared challenges that arise from the University's pursuit of its goals.

The Council develops AU's annual integrated resource plan for approval by Executive Team. The Council is a principal vehicle for communication among the President, Provost, Vice-Presidents, and senior administrators responsible for leadership and stewardship over university operations and affairs.

The Council is supported by the Provost's Integrated Resource Planning Working Team [\(VI.C1.19\)](#). The team supports the structure of the integrated resource planning process; this process includes assisting in the process of resource allocation and reallocation by working closely with Administrative Council. The Working Team also advises members of Executive Team and Administrative Council on resource allocation and reallocation matters.

As part of integrated planning, University leaders have also completed a series of Foundational Plans [\(VI.C1.20\)](#), which provide more focused direction to the University community on selected aspects of the broad strategic directions articulated in *IMAGINE*. The following foundational plans have been developed:

- *IMAGINE Learning Framework* ([VI.C1.20h](#))
- Envisioning the Future of FHSS 2015-2019: Writing a new chapter of open and flexible online Humanities and Social Sciences Learning (new plan is anticipated in 2021) ([VI.C1.20e](#))
- Faculty of Science and Technology Strategic Plan 2019–2023 ([VI.C1.20g](#))
- The Difference Makers: Faculty of Business Strategic Plan 2019-2025 ([VI.C1.20f](#))
- Faculty of Health Disciplines Strategic Plan 2019–2022 ([VI.C1.20d](#))
- Faculty of Graduate Studies Strategic Plan 2018–2022 ([VI.C1.20c](#))
- Student Services Strategic Plan 2018–2023 ([VI.C1.20l](#))
- Strategic Research Plan 2018–2022 ([VI.C1.20j](#))
- Strategic Enrolment Management Plan ([VI.C1.20m](#))
- EMPOWER: Athabasca University Human Resources Plan ([VI.C1.20b](#))
- RISE: Athabasca University's Digital Transformation: Our 5 Year IT Strategy ([VI.C1.20k](#))
- Nukskahtowin Plan ([VI.C1.20i](#))
- International Framework ([VI.C1.20a](#))

AU's foundational plans contribute to a "Priorities Portfolio" ([VI.C1.21](#)) to assemble institutional-level academic and operational priorities that contribute to the manifestation of *IMAGINE*. The priorities are responsive to the strategic, academic, and research goals of our institution. Developed annually, the Priorities Portfolio impacts AU's rolling operational and financial plans as well as performance planning as it is linked to capital and resource planning. All priorities are reflected in the performance accountability plans of the leadership team. The overall structure of integrated planning contributes to horizontal alignment as operational and strategic plans are developed with a balance of inputs from various levels of the institution.

The use of assessment results is supported by various processes. In 2019, AU introduced the first annual data-informed employee engagement survey in five years. The survey results have helped the University determine areas of strength and areas identified for improvement. Divisional leaders are using this data to inform improvements in their respective divisions and units. The annual Employee Engagement Survey will be administered every spring and has been integrated into AU's Integrated Planning Calendar ([VI.C1.22](#)).

As part of integrated planning, each year academic and administrative units submit an operational plan ([VI.C1.23](#)), which includes assessment of prior year goals, challenges and opportunities, and identification of plans for the subsequent year.

Performance management and assessment provides an additional opportunity for the assessment of administrative units. Similarly, academic units are required to engage in annual review process. Through performance management, AU measures progress toward meeting key performance indicators as expressed in the University's Institutional Health Report ([VI.C1.24](#)) and Strategic and Governance Dashboard ([VI.C1.25](#)).

Data from these processes, coupled with results from the annual assessment of *IMAGINE*, and external program reviews, are used to improve institutional and student outcomes and inform planning and resource allocation.

Criterion 2. **Clearly documented and communicated planning and improvement processes that provide for constituent participation and incorporate the use of assessment results.**

In broad terms, assessment is an important pillar of Integrated Planning as it helps the University determine whether it is on track or needs to make adjustments and course corrections in planning efforts, both on the strategic and operational levels. The details of planning, assessment and improvement processes are described below.

In August 2018, the "AU Institutional Metrics Project" was completed, resulting in the development of an Institutional Health Report ([VI.C2.01](#)) and a Strategic and Governance ([VI.C2.02](#)) Dashboard. The dashboards inform the integrated planning processes at the University. Updated quarterly, they are intended to:

- Provide a focused information base to support planning processes;
- Improve the University's ability to follow and project trends related to *IMAGINE* and to enable the evaluation of progress over time;
- Better satisfy information needs;
- Support and enable quarterly variance reporting

on divisional goals and individual performance accountabilities; and

- Provide a statistical profile of AU that informs a broad audience about both the identity of the institution and its transformational progress.

Refinements to these dashboards are underway.

In January 2019, the Provost and Vice President Academic announced a reorganization of his office to further enhance planning, evaluation, and assessment. The Office of Integrated Planning and Assessment was created; this office leads and coordinates the functions of institutional resource planning and assessment, data analysis and reporting, learning outcomes assessment, and quality assurance.

These changes were followed by the renaming of Institutional Studies to Institutional Data Analysis (IDA) (June 2019). This unit supports university-wide assessment activities by providing institutional data, analytical support, and reporting for the University community. IDA supports AU faculty and administrators with database development, evaluation consultation, focus groups and interviews, program development, and survey administration. The unit also performs customized data queries and data analysis as needed. Processes for mining institutional data and supporting the development of data collection and analytical strategies and tools continue to be enhanced with the recruitment of a new Manager, Institutional Data Analysis in January 2020.

AU is nearing the completion of an institutional-level learning outcomes assessment plan (anticipated in 2021). The development of strong institutional learning outcomes and a comprehensive assessment plan, including dissemination and result use strategies, will allow AU to identify the most important goals and priorities for student learning across the institution, to evaluate how well students are achieving these goals and priorities, and to use the results for better quality assurance, more effective planning, resource allocation, and institutional renewal processes.

The President's annual Performance Assessment and Accountability Framework ([VI.C2.04](#)) is submitted in January. Using the framework, members of Executive Team, and academic and administrative unit leaders complete individual Performance Assessment and Accountability Frameworks. These frameworks are shared among divisional teams. Assessment of prior years' results occurs in April. Administrative Council reviews and discusses the summary of institutional and

divisional outcomes every April ([VI.C2.15](#)). Salient outcomes and an assessment of velocity is presented at the annual Executive Team Retreat every June. The outcomes inform the preliminary resource needs for the coming year.

In a typical planning year, a call for annual integrated resource requests is issued to all academic and administrative units in July. As part of the process, each unit head is responsible for submitting an integrated resource plan. Included in the plan is an overview of assessment results from the prior year ([VI.C2.07a](#)). Upon review and consideration of annual unit reports and plans, the Council recommends to Executive Team resource allocation and new investments related to the strategic directions and priority outcomes identified in *IMAGINE*.

In addition to the development of annual integrated resource plans, members of the University community engage in assessment activities in a variety of ways:

- The President provides reports on achievements and progress made in support of strategic directions and the priority outcomes identified in the Strategic Plan to the governing bodies (The Board of Governors and General Faculties Council ([VI.C2.12](#)).
- Program self-studies prompt reflection on, and evidence of, assessment effectiveness and learner achievement ([VI.C2.03](#)). An External Reviewer visits the site and reports provide confirmation of the information provided in the self-study and an opportunity for suggestions for further improvement. The program's response report provides a summary of the self-study and external report and a five-year action plan for improvements. Annual updates to the Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee (APPSC) provide accountability and an opportunity to reflect on how program actions stemming from program reviews have improved the student learning environment ([VI.C2.05](#), Action Items 3.4, 3.5, 3.6, 3.7, and 3.8, [VI.C2.05AR](#)).
- Student Planning Consultations are conducted three times a year to review student priorities for inclusion in planning for the coming year. The first consultation includes a review of prior years' results ([VI.C2.06](#)).
- Convocation provides the forum for sharing highlights from annual reports and plans. The President provides an overview of major institutional outcomes of the previous year.

- In 2017, Athabasca University underwent a comprehensive Course and Program Review. In total, the subcommittee reviewed 95 programs and 329 courses (244 undergraduate and 85 graduate). The process and decisions made were integral to AU's Strategic Plan which calls on the institution to enable learner success through a sustainable and adaptable course, program, and credential mix. Based on this review, AU closed 16 programs to new admissions. In conjunction with these program closures, the University closed 74 undergraduate courses, and 11 graduate courses as part of the comprehensive review. The initiative has continued, as Program Health Reports are updated annually and utilized in integrated resource planning ([VI.C2.08](#)).
- As part of annual operational planning, unit leaders are asked to complete a strategic scan of their internal and external environment. Faculty Deans are encouraged to elaborate on their recent successes and areas needing improvement. Since FY 2019-20, all faculties have used program review data (both qualitative and quantitative) in their planning for the next fiscal year. Furthermore, the Integrated Resource Planning Template ([VI.C2.07](#), [VI.C2.07a](#)) requires Deans and other unit leaders to reflect upon their annual operational plans and integrate learning outcomes assessment data, including program reviews, in the determination of their operational and strategic priorities. There is wide recognition that the ongoing assessment of student learning and program reviews are an essential component of the assessment of institutional effectiveness and continuous improvement. This assessment will be further enhanced following the operationalization of AU's Institutional Learning Outcomes Assessment Plan. Furthermore, if requesting a faculty position or administrative positions in support of an academic program, Deans must provide information from their last institutional program review and current Program Health Report to bring together information for understanding the relationship among needs, goals, activities, faculty structure, processes, and resources within their faculty.
- In 2018, the Provost and Vice President Academic convened an Academic Leadership Team, constituted by the Provost, Deans, and Associate Vice Presidents. The team is focused on enhancing academic affairs at Athabasca University, and areas in need of improvement ([VI.C2.09](#)).
- The Division of Finance and Administration has been undergoing a transformation to improve organizational and performance effectiveness

and alignment with integrated planning priorities. Two projects are underway, including the OneAU Service Model for Financial Planning and Analysis and the Finance and Administration Services Optimization. Please see further information under Criterion 3 ([VI.C2.13](#)).

Similar planning and improvement processes take place at the faculty level. Each of the five faculties has developed their own strategic plan, which flow from and are integrated with the University's *IMAGINE* plan. While these plans are linked to the *IMAGINE* Plan, they also are formed through consultation with faculty and staff as they review their own assessment results. Three of the key assessment instruments used by faculties are program reviews, assurance of learning, and discipline specific accreditation assessments.

- Program reviews are conducted every five years. They involve a detailed assessment of program goals, outcomes, alignment with faculty vision and mission, adequacy and distribution of resources, and integration into the rest of the faculty and the University as a whole. Typically, a committee from within the program undertakes this assessment with input from across the faculty as well as from external stakeholders both in the University and beyond (e.g., alumni, industry organizations, accreditors). Program review results are discussed at the program council level, and an action plan associated with the findings is decided on. Next, it goes to the Faculty Council level for discussion and approval. In this way, the assessments from the program review are to be incorporated into the planning and improvement processes within the faculty, which feed into university-level planning and improvement processes ([VI.C2.10](#)).
- Assurance of learning (AoL) is a more specific assessment process that feeds directly into the teaching and learning of a faculty. The aim of AoL is to improve the quality and consistency of student learning across a program and the faculty. Again, these assessments are carried out at a program level. Results from these assessments inform changes within the program – course content, course and program structure and staffing levels. These results also contribute to program reviews, although AoL is carried out on a continuous basis rather than on a five-year cycle like program reviews.
- In addition to general program reviews and AoL processes, other assessments are conducted within faculties according to unique accreditations. For example, the Faculty of Business (FB) is working towards accreditation

with Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business ([VI.C2.11](#)), which regularly requires assessment of mission, vision, finances, teaching and learning effectiveness, impact of the faculty in society, faculty qualifications, and rigour of disciplinary content coverage. All of these assessments feed into planning and improvement in the faculty, which, in turn, shape the faculty's strategic plan. Other faculties (e.g., the Faculty of Health Disciplines) have similar accreditation assessment requirements that contribute to their planning and improvement processes.

- The FB provides one practical example where these assessments have contributed to planning and changes within a faculty. Through both a program review from two years ago and the AoL work over the past three years in two of the FB undergraduate degree programs, it was determined that there was significant overlap and redundancy between the two programs (Bachelor of Commerce and Bachelor of Management – 4-year). After detailed review and discussion of these assessments, it was decided that FB should merge the two programs ([VI.C2.16](#), Action Item 3.3, Motion 50.03). In this way, FB assessments directly contributed to planning and improvements within the faculty.

Moreover, to further enhance assessment, the University is developing a university-wide Data and Analytics Framework ([VI.C2.17](#)). The Framework will enable AU to effectively use data and analytics to support decision-making in achieving its academic and operational mission. This OneAU Transformation Initiative will be implemented in tandem with the ILE ([VI.C2.14](#)).

Criterion 3.

A financial planning and budgeting process that is aligned with the institution's mission and goals, evidence-based, and clearly linked to the institution's and units' strategic plans/objectives, and Requirement 11 (Financial Resources).

Integrated planning ensures that AU's mission and strategic goals are effectively supported. AU's Integrated Planning process is outlined in the integrated planning calendar ([VI.C3.01](#)).

The Integrated Resource Plan (IRP) is a fundamental plan for the University as expressed in AU's Integrated Planning Framework. The plan is a mechanism for ensuring that financial resources are aligned with *IMAGINE*, areas of focus are identified in AU's Foundational Plans, and AU's Priorities Portfolio is outlined as above.

Currently, the University allocation model is enrollment-driven and characterized by an incremental budget. The University completed a large upgrade to its financial system, Banner, and moved to Banner 9 in November 2018.

Athabasca University utilizes the Cognos TM1 budget system for each Annual Integrated Resource Planning cycle. The TM1 budget system incorporates a 3-year resource requirement within each Integrated Resource Planning cycle.

The budget system contains the Permanent [Ongoing], One time-Internal [Current fiscal only], One time-External funding source data that provides the resource requirement for each fiscal operating year by department and division. The resource request requirements include position changes, physical location of new positions, IT hardware for new positions, non-salary, capital requests and operating revenues. All requests within the Cognos TM1 budget system are verified to the department's Integrated Resource Planning template and are consolidated to be reviewed by Administrative Council that align to the *IMAGINE* plan and AU's Priorities Portfolio.

As outlined above, the financial planning and budgeting process is enabled by Administrative Council. Agenda materials are developed in alignment with AU's Integrated Planning Calendar.

In the first year of integrated resource planning, AU developed an operational planning template and an integrated resource planning template. In the spirit of continuous improvement, the templates were combined in FY 2019-2020. Templates are updated every year in response to the internal and external context. The process is focused on aligning and allocating the resources to realize AU's Strategic Plan. Maintaining a balanced budget for the planning period and over the long term is a priority. Deliberations are supported by data and objective decision criteria to ensure transparent and accountable recommendations. Priorities expressed by AU's learners during the planning cycle are built into the criteria ([VI.C3.05](#)).

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Quarterly variance analysis and forecasting is part of the University's overall accountability framework, providing the Board of Governors with regular reports on the University's financial operations as compared to the Board-approved Integrated Resource Plan. Variance reports are reviewed and presented at divisional meetings to promote accountability.

An internal audit entitled Internal Audit of Budget and Monitoring Processes ([VI.C3.02](#)) was concluded in 2016 and identified the need for greater accountability of budget holders within the budgeting and forecasting process. The process for quarterly operating variance results and financial forecasts was amended in October 2019 to shift the focus from a Financial Services function to each budget holder. The shift has resulted in more focus on explaining why a variance occurred rather than on simple reporting it. This has increased AU's ability to:

- Formulate appropriate and necessary corrective/responsive actions.
- Promote the level of understanding of operations that supports an agile organization in a dynamic, changing environment.
- Redeploy surplus funds in a more agile manner, in order to fund additional priorities or initiatives that require additional funding.
- Take corrective action in the face of existing or forecasted overspending of approved operating budgets.

The changes have introduced a better understanding of costs and cost drivers. Resource leaders understand the status of their budget and management as a whole and therefore have better understanding of the quarterly operating position as a basis for in-year action and decision-making. This process elevates the accountability of individual budget holders and leverages the benefits of the monitoring process. Overall, we are seeing an enhanced quarterly monitoring process in support of both the University's quarterly board reporting and in support of management reporting and decision-making and the University's new accountability framework.

In relation to this initiative, AU is engaging an external consultant to design, implement and maintain a comprehensive Activity-Based Cost and Revenue Management (ABC) Model in order to understand full cost, revenue, and margins associated with program and course delivery, and to determine how activities and other outputs consume University resources in order to further support decision-making ([VI.C3.04](#)). The key deliverable of this project will be a scalable and sustainable ABC Model to be utilized for cost and revenue analysis to support operational and resource decisions. The ABC Model should allow for enhanced data collection and reporting capabilities. Initial work on the ABC Model commenced October 2019 and will continue until project completion (expected in 2021).

Capital planning processes continue to be refined. The Integrated Planning Working Group is reviewing the capital planning process to optimize integration with the IRP process and Digital Governance Committee oversight. Integration of the capital and IRP processes ensures the resource needs are completely understood and aligned with funding sources. While significant changes were implemented for the fiscal 2021–2022 budget year ([VI.C3.03](#)), the full rollout of the new capital planning process and procedures will not be in place until the following planning cycle (fiscal 2022–2023).

Criterion 4.

Fiscal and human resources as well as the physical and technical infrastructure are adequate to support its operations wherever and however programs are delivered, and Requirement 11 (Financial Resources).

Athabasca University's financial stability is evidenced by growing budget surpluses over recent years. It has financial resources adequate to support its operations, as well as enrolment growth and the investments necessary to implement the Strategic Plan ([VI.C4.05](#), [VI.C4.08](#)).

AU uses several mechanisms to demonstrate stability:

- An annual integrated resource planning process to ensure that asset allocation is directed to the institution's mission and strategic directions.

- An Enterprise Risk Management Framework (updated quarterly) to ensure risks are identified as they develop, are mitigated appropriately and reported to the Board of Governors. ([VI.C4.06](#), [VI.C4.09](#), [VI.C4.10](#)).
- Internal and external audits which have reaffirmed the effectiveness of the Universities systems. Our current external audit report card evidences effective and timely financial processes ([VI.C4.07](#)).

In 2019, Alberta's newly elected United Conservative Party (UCP) government appointed an independent panel of experts to review Alberta's finances and economy. Delivered in August 2019, "The MacKinnon Panel on Alberta's Finances ([VI.C4.01](#)) recommended ways to eliminate waste, duplication and non-essential spending to fund government's key priorities, while ensuring high-quality, front-line services for Albertans."

In assessing Alberta's post-secondary system, the report expressed broad concerns ([VI.C4.02](#)) about spending and outcomes from the post-secondary system in Alberta. Specific concerns were expressed regarding administrative and per student costs, and completion rates.

The provincial budget, released on October 24, 2019, drew from the findings expressed in the MacKinnon Report. Alberta's post-secondary sector will experience a reduction of 5% in FY2019–2020 and 12% over the next four years (excluding inflation). Reductions were also made on an institution-by-institution basis.

For AU, the Campus Alberta Base Grant was reduced by 3.6% for FY 2019/2020 fiscal year (~\$1.6M) and the infrastructure maintenance program (IMP) grant was reduced by 100% (~\$1.79M). Both reductions were made in-year. Future reductions are not known at this time as the province is focused on managing COVID-19.

While these reductions are not immaterial, AU is in a strong position to manage them, adjust to a new funding model, and simultaneously continue to make progress toward its goals, as outlined in the *IMAGINE* Plan.

Anticipating a cut to AU's base grant, university leaders worked over the 2019 summer months in planning for contingencies and repurposing resources in anticipation of significant changes to the AU government grant. This activity focused on finding efficiencies and freeing up

funds for priorities by stopping or cutting back other expenditures. The activity was repeated in 2020. The University recognizes the need to stay focused on the work it has planned and not lose the momentum to capitalize on the significant opportunities ahead.

Among the significant impacts going forward is that the government announced plans related to tuition. Specifically, the cap on tuition will be raised to 7% annually for the next three years. After that period, the cap will return to Consumer Price Index. As it stands, students contribute 20 percent to the cost of their education, while taxpayers contribute 50 percent. Under Alberta's new tuition changes, this mix will change to 25 percent and 45 percent, respectively.

Moreover, it is anticipated that a new funding model will be introduced in 2021 that will require the University to demonstrate value for the resources it receives as an institution through various performance measures which have been outlined in the Alberta Advanced Education Business Plan for 2019–2023 ([VI.C4.03](#)).

While the provincial budget has created a degree of uncertainty for the post-secondary system in Alberta, AU has demonstrated a track record of being flexible and adaptable in reacting to changes in the external environment.

Human Resources

Human Resources (HR) plays a critical role in ensuring that AU's mission is actualized by ensuring the recruitment, retention, and development of University personnel. The University recently hired key personnel to HR to lead the development of AU and its workforce (i.e. Deputy Chief Human Resources Officer, Director, Business Transformation, additional HR client partners).

In 2018–2019, optimization of the Human Resources Unit included exploration of a strategic human resources system and supporting values, culture and talent management frameworks that support and reinforce AU's semi-virtual organization. In addition, in an effort to optimize, streamline, standardize, and modernize HR service delivery, a comprehensive review and analysis of HR policies and processes was completed.

Currently, AU has a total workforce of 1,147, with full-time and part-time faculty comprising 19% active positions.

The University uses ACQUIRE for position management. HR follows hiring protocols consistent with broader University policies and procedures. The University places high priority on the recruitment of a diverse workforce, as reflected in AU's *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Framework* ([VI.C4.04](#)).

The University is developing a Leadership Framework which will guide individuals to participate at work in formal and informal leadership situations to contribute meaningfully to the culture at AU. The framework is part of a 2022 Deliverable in *IMAGINE* which commits AU to developing a "Values based culture that recognizes AU's I-CARE values, along with a culture of inclusion, belonging, resilience, innovation, continuous improvement and engagement."

Physical Resources

The creation of a purposeful and supported semi-virtual organizational structure through technology, infrastructure and social processes is expressed in the *IMAGINE* plan.

In early 2020, the University shifted original proposal and approved plans to transition to a near-virtual organizational structure by December 2021. The Near-Virtual Transition Plan will roll out in three phases as follows:

1. A critical focus on AU's continued monitoring of Health guidelines on COVID-19 and effective responses to the pandemic.
2. The development and implementation of a OneAU Telework Policy and associated telework program.
3. The full transition to a near-virtual Organization.

In order to facilitate the necessary consultation and collaboration required to transition efficiently to a near-virtual organization with full consideration of AU's strategic academic and research goals, a Near-Virtual Working Group reporting into the Administrative Council was convened. Work on this initiative is underway ([VI.C4.11](#), PDF Page 16, [VI.C4.12](#), Agenda Item 4.2, Page 2).

Technical Infrastructure

Modernization of the technological environment required to support the *IMAGINE Learning Framework* and emergent pedagogical needs in support of *IMAGINE* has been a major focus of the past year, and work in this direction is well underway.

The *RISE plan* ([VI.C4.14](#)) is integral to transforming AU's technical infrastructure. AU's 5-year strategy is to provide complete flexibility and accessibility to online students in Alberta, Canada, and the world. AU is in the process of creating a cloud-based digital learning environment that encourages learning for a lifetime and provides a collaborative space for students, professors, and researchers to engage continuously in innovative digital pedagogy, applied augmented intelligence, and online learning experiences.

In October 2018, AU became the first Canadian university to enter into a formal collaboration with Amazon Web Services (AWS), a significant part of the University's digital transformation and a key outcome of the RISE plan. Collaboration with AWS gives AU the modern cloud infrastructure, tools, and training necessary to enable a learning model that is flexible, scalable, and affordable to both learners and the University. The move to the cloud will provide projected savings for AU of approximately \$16M over five years.

As part of AU's transformation, we are also reimagining IT service delivery. AU's future IT structure will reflect AU's Cloud-First environment and focus on further enhancement of AU's digital security. Work on this project began in November 2020. The IT and HR teams are working towards an early 2021 kick-off for this IT Optimization ([VI.C4.13](#)).

Criterion 5. Well-defined decision-making processes and clear assignment of responsibility and accountability.

Decision-making at AU is well-defined with clear assignment of responsibility and is reflected in the University's Governance processes. The governance and decision-making structure described below provides an overview of the key constituencies and their responsibilities.

Governance

Athabasca University governs itself through a bicameral governance structure, as set out in the Alberta Post-Secondary Learning Act ([VI.C5.01](#)) and the Athabasca University Regulation ([VI.C5.02](#)). The Board of Governors (BoG) is the senior governing body, but shares academic governance with the General Faculties Council, the academic governing body.

The University Secretariat provides support for all areas of the BoG and GFC, enabling both bodies (and their respective standing committees) to govern the institution in an efficient and effective manner.

The BoG manages and operates the institution in accordance with its mandate. The conduct, management, and control of the University and all its property, revenue, and business affairs are vested in the BoG.

The Board has delegated responsibility and authority to Standing Committees to make decisions on behalf of the BoG as defined in the Terms of Reference & Membership for each Committee. The Standing Committees are:

- Audit Committee ([VI.C5.03](#))
- Executive Committee ([VI.C5.04](#))
- Finance & Property Committee ([VI.C5.05](#))
- Governance Committee ([VI.C5.06](#))
- Honorary Awards Committee ([VI.C5.07](#))
- Human Resources & Compensation Committee ([VI.C5.08](#))

The General Faculties Council, subject to the authority of the BoG, is responsible for the academic and student affairs of the University. The powers of GFC are set out under section 26 of the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* ([VI.C5.01](#)) and section 13 of the *Athabasca University Regulation* ([VI.C5.02](#)), and include granting degrees, approval of academic programs, academic policies, academic awards and the [University Calendar](#).

The GFC Rules ([VI.C5.12](#)) set out the terms of office for and responsibilities of members, rules of order for meetings, GFC's standing committees, and their membership composition.

GFC has delegated responsibility and authority to Standing Committees to make decisions on its behalf as defined in the Terms of Reference and Membership for each Committee. The Standing Committees are:

- Academic Excellence Awards Committee ([VI.C5.13](#))
- Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee ([VI.C5.14](#))
- Academic Research Committee ([VI.C5.15](#))
- Executive Committee ([VI.C5.16](#))
- Student Academic Appeals Committee ([VI.C5.17](#))
- Student Awards Committee ([VI.C5.18](#))

Advisory Groups

AU's Governance structure is supported by several advisory groups, including:

Deans' Council

The Deans' Council, established under section 27 of the *Post-Secondary Learning Act*, is an advisory body to the President, the BoG, and GFC.

Administrative Council

Administrative Council brings together key administrative leaders to operationalize integrated planning and assessment cycles in service of Athabasca University's *IMAGINE* Plan. As the administrative complement to formal academic committees, the Council supports effective bicameral governance at the University. By promoting inter-divisional and cross-portfolio communication and information sharing, Administrative Council offers a forum for key administrators to develop common understandings of institutional priorities, and to collectively identify, address, and develop solutions to resolve shared challenges that arise from the University's pursuit of its goals.

Digital Governance Committee

The Digital Governance Committee is an advisory Committee with responsibility to the Executive Team. The purpose of the Committee is to assist the Executive Team in fulfilling its due diligence, fiduciary, financial reporting, and audit response responsibilities by monitoring, evaluating, and providing advice on matters affecting all university digital initiatives. University digital initiatives are defined as strategic or operational digital/technology projects funded by any faculty, department, or administrative unit (excluding professors' specific research projects).

These advisory groups meet monthly.

Policies and Procedures

AU's policies and procedures are housed on the University's Policy and Procedures Manual (VI.C5.19). The website forms the central location for approved policies and procedures currently in effect.

Additional information on governance and administration is provided in Standard VII: Governance, Leadership, and Administration.

Criterion 6. **Comprehensive planning for facilities, infrastructure, and technology that includes consideration of sustainability and deferred maintenance and is linked to the institution's strategic and financial planning processes.**

Both the Universities *Integrated Resource Plan* (example [VI.C6.01](#)) and *Summary Capital and Infrastructure Plan* (example [VI.C6.02](#)) are developed and prioritized in alignment with the *IMAGINE* Plan. They are both approved at the same time and by the same bodies and are drawn from available resources.

The availability of resources for facilities, infrastructure, and technology have continued to improve over time as evidenced by the previous discussion of sustainability. With the University showing surpluses to budget in both the Integrated Resource plan (operating budget) and the Summary Capital and Infrastructure plan (capital budget) over recent years, the University has been able to fund the critical components of the *IMAGINE* Plan.

Criterion 7. **An annual independent audit confirming financial viability with evidence of follow-up on any concerns cited in the audit's accompanying management letter.**

On an annual basis, AU engages an external auditor to audit the University's consolidated financial statements to ensure compliance. AU's Year-End Audited Financial Reports are available on the Financial Services website ([VI.C7.01](#), [VI.C7.02](#)).

The Auditor General of Alberta is AU's external Auditor. The Auditor publishes an annual report card for all of the Alberta PSI's ([VI.C7.02](#)). The report for each fiscal year is published in August and provides a green light for accuracy and timeliness of financial reporting and the institution's overall control environment. In the most recent report, AU received green ratings for Financial Statement Accuracy, Financial Statement Timeliness, and for Outstanding Recommendations ([VI.C7.04](#)).

AU also has an independent internal audit function, which develops and implements an Internal Audit Plan ([VI.C7.05](#)). The plan is approved by the Audit Committee of the BoG. Quarterly status updates are provided to the Audit Committee.

Criterion 8. **Strategies to measure and assess the adequacy and efficient utilization of institutional resources required to support the institution's mission and goals.**

The University relies on the integrated resource planning process to determine the adequacy and effectiveness of the utilization of institutional resources. In addition, various accountability reporting requirements support adequacy and efficient utilization of resources.

The *Post-Secondary Learning Act* ([VI.C8.02](#)) requires that public institutions submit to the Minister of Advanced Education an annual report that includes their audited financial statements, as well as any other information required by the Minister. The submission of public institution annual reports is part of the accountability process provided for in the *Fiscal Planning and Transparency Act* ([VI.C8.01](#)). The Ministry also uses annual reports in monitoring compliance with legislation and government/Ministry policies.

The information contained in annual reports contributes to the department's understanding of institutions' achievements and best practices, the challenges faced and the progress of Alberta's publicly funded institutions. This understanding contributes to informing department planning for the advanced education system ([VI.C8.03](#)).

In the future, post-secondary funding will be tied to performance-based indicators expressed in Investment Management Agreements (under development). The new performance-based funding model, which will begin sometime in 2021, will see part of universities' provincial funding tied to their success at meeting goals, such as enrolment targets or employment rates of graduates. Athabasca University is working with Advanced Education on the implementation of the new model and will do what is needed to achieve agreed upon metrics.

Criterion 9. Periodic assessment of the effectiveness of planning, resource allocation, institutional renewal processes, and availability of resources.

The Integrated Resource Planning (IRP) Working Group ([VI.C9.03](#)) evaluates the alignment and effectiveness of integrated planning on an ongoing basis. Adjustments to the process are made accordingly, as was the case in the FY 2020–2021 planning period when Administrative Council undertook a university-wide repurposing initiative to identify funds in anticipation of a cut to AU's base grant.

More detailed refinements to integrated planning are outlined below.

Improvements to Integrated Planning

Recognizing that assessment is essential for effective planning, and in alignment with AU's Integrated Planning Calendar, the IRP Working Group conducted an evaluation of Integrated Planning in April 2019. Several adjustments were made to AU's Integrated Planning Calendar to further support synchronization of our planning efforts across the institution:

- "Employee Engagement Survey" – added to April
- "Assess Prior Years' Results" – added to May
- "Integrated Resource Planning Kick-off" – moved from July to June
- "Executive Team Operational Planning and Priority Setting" – moved from August to June

The planning cycle itself was assessed by Administrative Council in April 2019 ([VI.C9.01](#), Agenda Item 3.1). Utilizing a planning tool from the Society of College and University Planning, budget holders were asked to reflect upon "Components of an Integrated Planning Culture." The evaluation focused on assessing integrated planning utilizing various themes, including sustainability, horizons, culture, relationships, conflict, commitment, alignment, power, decision-making, preparedness for change, direction, and leadership. Faculty and unit leaders were asked the following questions:

- What observations and recommendations do you have about integrated planning?
- How can we enhance and sustain a culture of integrated planning? In other words, how do we

enable a high impact organizational culture that values strategy and preparedness for change, collaboration, and healthy and productive debate, empowering us to pursue AU's mission?

A four-point scale was developed ([VI.C9.02](#), Agenda Item 2.3, and PDF Pages 8–10). One (1) represented a need to build an integrated planning culture (Build-a-Plan); four (4) represented a healthy integrated planning culture. Survey results revealed the following:

- The Relationships, Alignment, and Power ratings were much more on the Build-a-Plan Culture end of the spectrum, whereas Commitment and Direction were farther to the other end of the scale.
- Culture, Relationships, Alignment, Power, and Preparedness for Change had no ratings of 4; all of these factors, with the exception of Preparedness for Change, had more ratings on the lower end of the scale.
- Commitment had no ratings of 1.
- Overall, comments centered around challenges with communication and a lack of consistency in "applying the rules."

Recognizing that building and sustaining a culture of integrated planning requires leadership from all members of Administrative Council, several changes have been implemented and/or recognized:

- As outlined above, in October 2019, AU implemented an enhanced quarterly financial monitoring process (applicable to operational funding).
- The University continues to identify areas where efficiencies, innovations, and careful examination of costs and costs drivers offer opportunities to respond to shifting funding levels and allow for repurposing of funds and investment in the institution's future. Identifying opportunities to repurpose resources is now part of the annual Integrated Planning process.

An evaluation of the FY2021–2022 planning cycle was completed in January 2021 ([VI.C9.04](#), [VI.C9.05](#)). The IRP Working Group is devising a plan to improve the next planning cycle based on the feedback received.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

- Improve institutional effectiveness structures and assessment practices by implementing an institutional-level assessment process.



Athabasca
University

Standard VII: Governance, Leadership and Administration

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Standard VII: Governance, Leadership and Administration

The institution is governed and administered in a manner that allows it to realize its stated mission and goals in a way that effectively benefits the institution, its students, and the other constituencies it serves. Even when supported by or affiliated with governmental, corporate, religious, educational system, or other unaccredited organizations, the institution has education as its primary purpose, and it operates as an academic institution with appropriate autonomy.

OVERVIEW

A full description and illustration of the ways in which Athabasca University meets the five criteria and all applicable sub-criteria of Standard VII, as well as Requirements of Affiliation 12 and 13, are presented here.

Criterion 1. **A clearly articulated and transparent governance structure that outlines roles, responsibilities, and accountability for decision making by each constituency, including governing body, administration, faculty, staff, and students.**

AU is committed to efficient, effective, and transparent decision-making. As a public university in Alberta, Athabasca University is governed by Alberta's PSLA ([VII.C1.01](#)) and the Athabasca University Regulation ([VII.C1.02](#)). The governing bodies within AU's bicameral governance structure, comprising the Board of Governors (BoG) and General Faculties Council (GFC), share decision-making powers and accountability. Except where altered by the BoG Bylaws ([VII.C1.03](#)) or the GFC Rules ([VII.C1.04](#)), the proceedings of the BoG, GFC, and their respective committees are governed by the most recently published version of Robert's Rules of Order. Both governing bodies have gone through comprehensive reviews since 2010.

As required by the *Alberta Public Agencies Governance Act*, SA 2009, c. A-31.5 ([VII.C1.05](#)), Athabasca University has a Mandate and Roles document ([VII.C1.06](#)), developed jointly by the University and the responsible Minister of the Provincial Government, which clearly articulates roles and responsibilities, as well as accountability relationships.

The BoG is ultimately responsible for the administration of AU; however, as established in the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* ([VII.C1.01](#)), the President is responsible for the overall operations of the institution. GFC has responsibility for decisions related to academic affairs. The BoG and GFC have delegated decision-making authority to their respective standing committees through clearly articulated and approved terms of reference.

In relation to the BoG, the structure and guidance of the decision-making processes are set out in the General Bylaws – Board of Governors of Athabasca University ([VII.C1.03](#)), ensuring that the BoG is fulfilling its obligations and duties required by legislation. As well, the BoG Bylaws establish the roles and responsibilities of the BoG, members, BoG Chair, Vice Chair, Acting BoG Chair and Committee Chairs.

The current membership of the BoG is set out in the Athabasca University Regulation ([VII.C1.02](#)), and comprises: the BoG Chair and 10 members representative of the general public, who are appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council, the President of the University, one alumnus member appointed by Ministerial Order, and eight other members who are nominated by their respective groups, and appointed by Ministerial Order as follows: two members of the academic staff, one nominated by the GFC, and one nominated by the academic staff association, one member of the non-academic staff, one tutor/academic expert, two undergraduate students and one graduate student.

The BoG has six standing committees: Audit Committee ([VII.C1.10](#)), Executive Committee ([VII.C1.11](#)), Finance and Property Committee ([VII.C1.12](#)), Governance Committee ([VII.C1.13](#)), Honorary Awards Committee ([VII.C1.14](#)), and Human Resources and Compensation Committee ([VII.C1.15](#)).

The General Faculties Council Rules ([VII.C1.04](#)) provide guidance and structure to the proceedings of GFC in fulfilling its obligations and duties pursuant to legislation. As per the membership requirements set out in the *Athabasca University Regulation*, GFC is currently composed of 53 members including members by virtue of office, elected full-time academic staff members, student members, a tutor member, non-academic staff members, and additional appointed members.

The GFC also has six standing committees: The Academic Excellence Awards Committee ([VII.C1.16](#)), the Academic Planning, Policy, and Standards Committee ([VII.C1.17](#)), the Academic Research Committee ([VII.C1.18](#)), the Executive Committee ([VII.C1.19](#)), the Student Academic Appeals Committee ([VII.C1.20](#)), and the Student Awards Committee ([VII.C1.21](#)).

As well, delegated authority to the Administration is affected through recorded decisions of the governing bodies and policy in relation to matters such as human resources, finance and administration, and digital governance and technology. Some examples of policies dealing specifically with delegated decision-making are the *Delegation of Expenditure Approval Authority Policy* ([VII.C1.22](#)), the *Contract Administration Policy* ([VII.C1.23](#)), and the *Purchasing Policy* ([VII.C1.24](#)).

Other advisory committees within the institution support decision-making to ensure subject-

matter experts and stakeholders are in place to evaluate and provide the necessary information to governance bodies to enable them to fulfill their responsibilities. As described in Standard VI, one such body is Administrative Council ([VII.C1.25](#)), which acts as a leadership body and advisory group to the Executive Team on cross-divisional operationalization of *IMAGINE* ([VII.C1.26](#)). It also is engaged throughout the resource planning and assessment cycles of the University and promotes opportunities for institution-wide discussion on opportunities, challenges, and concerns, as well as process improvements and risk-mitigation strategies.

Another example is the Digital Governance Committee ([VII.C1.33](#)), which monitors, evaluates, and provides advice related to AU's digital initiatives. As a digital, online university, coordination of digital initiatives and resources is key to success for our learners. The Digital Governance Committee ensures that all digital initiatives are aligned with the University's strategic direction and goals, and that risks are properly assessed, and approved resources are properly allocated.

The Office of the University Secretariat ([VII.C1.27](#)) is key to the effective and efficient operation of the bicameral system of governance. It oversees the development and maintenance of BoG Bylaws ([VII.C1.03](#)), GFC Rules ([VII.C1.04](#)), and standing committee terms of reference. It coordinates meetings of the governing bodies, including development of agendas and management of submissions. As well, the Office of the University Secretariat coordinates nomination and recruitment of new members to the governing bodies and delivers training and ongoing awareness of roles and responsibilities to members. It also provides expertise and guidance in the areas of access to information and protection of privacy, and manages the policy program of the University, including the maintenance and regular review of the Policy and Procedures.

Governance Reviews

In 2011, the GFC voted on and approved new Bylaws. These introduced a new standing committee structure with clear mandates set out in the approved Terms of Reference for each. A further review of the academic governance structure was completed in 2015 and 2018. During the 2015 review, the GFC Bylaws were changed to the GFC Rules. As only the Board may enact bylaws per section 18 of the PSLA; this change allows the GFC, subject to the authority of the BoG, to set

their own governance processes. Additionally, the nomination committee was dissolved, with duties of the former committee assigned to the GFC Executive Committee. Furthermore, the Academic Standards Committee and the Academic Planning and Policy Committee were also dissolved with duties given to the new established Academic Planning, Policy and Standards Committee. During the 2018 review, GFC Bylaws were revised, establishing a new standing committee structure.

The Board Governance Review took place in 2016 resulting in the approval of new Board of Governors General Bylaws in 2018, which established a new standing committee structure, including a new Board Governance Committee. Terms of Reference for each standing committee were also approved, setting out mandates and delegated decision-making authorities.

Another significant change was the establishment of a Provostial Model. The move toward this model was formally recommended to the Board in 2016 by the new President. In January 2017, the Provost was combined with the Vice President Academic position, bringing together overall leadership of institutional resource planning, academic operations, and academic strategy. The Office of the Provost underwent an optimization in 2019–2020 which included the hiring of the Deputy Provost, Academic Operations and refinement of the Associate Vice Presidents and their roles and responsibilities in the areas of integrated planning, academic resources, and research.

A comprehensive review of all policies and procedures began in 2018 after the new *Policy Framework – Governing Policy* (VII.C1.30) was approved by the BoG. The Policy Framework Implementation Project is intended to ensure that policy development across Athabasca University is streamlined, consistent, and supports strategic goals and initiatives. The comprehensive review will ensure that all policies align with the new Policy Framework. Executive Team approved a plan to complete over 60 high-priority policies of strategic importance by the end of fiscal year 2019-20 as identified by policy sponsors. Lower priority policies are to be completed in fiscal year 2020-21.

Most recently, changes to Alberta’s Conflicts of Interest Act, RSA 2000, c. C-23 (VII.C1.07), required a comprehensive review of AU’s codes of conduct and conflict of interest policies. In August 2019, the BoG approved the new Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for the Board of Governors (VII.C1.31), and the Code of Conduct for

Members of the University Community (VII.C1.32), coming into force on September 1, 2019. These new codes establish clear expectations and guidelines and new processes to ensure transparency and accountability in decision-making.

Criterion 2. A legally constituted governing body that:

- a. serves the public interest, ensures that the institution clearly states and fulfills its mission and goals, has fiduciary responsibility for the institution, and is ultimately accountable for the academic quality, planning, and fiscal well-being of the institution;

Athabasca University has worked to develop strong strategic planning and leadership across the institution. As discussed previously, the *IMAGINE* Plan articulates the overall strategic direction of the institution, and all other strategic goals and initiatives align with this vision. Each member of the governing bodies, the academy, and the administration understands their obligation to work toward common goals and integrated outcomes.

To ensure accountability toward the fulfillment of AU’s mission and goals, institutional decision-making and reporting are transparent and regular. The President provides quarterly reports to the BoG and GFC on achievements and progress made for each priority outcome identified in the *IMAGINE* Plan (VII.C2a.01). In addition to progress and achievements, the President sets out upcoming action items and deliverables to ensure strategic goals remain on track. As well, the President provides updates to the governing bodies on pertinent progress related to other ongoing initiatives.

As stated in Standard VI, regular reporting to the Provincial Government is required annually.

Decisions are made openly and transparently. Notice is provided to the public in advance of the open session (public portion) of BoG meetings and in advance of GFC meetings. Agendas and approved Minutes of open sessions of the BoG and GFC are posted onto our public facing website to ensure those affected are aware of decisions made.

b. has sufficient independence and expertise to ensure the integrity of the institution. Members must have primary responsibility to the accredited institution and not allow political, financial, or other influences to interfere with their governing responsibilities;

Members of AU's governing bodies are required to act at all times in the best interest of the institution once they are appointed to the BoG or elected to the GFC. Both governing bodies are provided with comprehensive orientation as to their roles and responsibilities, and members are subject to applicable codes of conduct.

BoG members are appointed by the provincial government as set out in the *Athabasca University Regulations* (VII.C2b.01). To assist the government in the recruitment process, a Board Skills and Competency Matrix (VII.C2b.02) is completed annually by BoG Members and the data is compiled and analyzed by the Board Governance Committee to identify potential gaps in skills and expertise required of the BoG. This information serves to ensure that recruitment efforts are focused on what is necessary for effective decision-making based on the needs of the institution.

The BoG Bylaws set out in clause 4.3.1 stipulate the following: "As stated in the Act [PSLA], Members bear a fiduciary responsibility and are expected to act in the best interests of the University. Although Members bring special expertise and points of view to the Board's deliberations, the best interests of the University remain paramount in all board activities. Members must adhere to the Board's Bylaws, the University's policies and applicable legislation." Members are further supported by the Member Handbook, which assists them in understanding their role and responsibility as members of the governing bodies.

GFC Rules (VII.C2b.03) also set out in clause 11.1 stipulate that "Council members and members of committees of the Council must be guided by the best interests of the University, the welfare of the University community, and the honest and good faith discharge of their duties under the [Post-Secondary Learning Act]." This clause is central to the roles and responsibilities of members of GFC, and along with 11.1 and 11.2 set out conflict of interest provisions applicable to members.

Codes of conduct also provide a framework on which the governing bodies must act to ensure impartiality, transparency, and accountability in decision-making. The BoG is subject to the *Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for the Board of Governors* (VII.C2b.04), and General Faculties Council is subject to the *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* (VII.C2b.05). Each governing body requires members to declare actively before all governing body and committee meetings any actual, potential, or perceived conflict of interest in relation to any agenda item being deliberated. This requirement ensures that transparency and accountability inform all decision-making exercises.

c. ensures that neither the governing body nor its individual members interferes in the day-to-day operations of the institution;

The *Post-Secondary Learning Act* (VII.C2c.01), establishes in section 81(3) that "a president has general supervision over and direction of the operation of the public post-secondary institution and has those other powers, duties and functions that are assigned to the president by the board." As such, governing bodies and their members are not assigned day-to-day operational duties and functions. The President must ensure that any decisions made are aligned with the BoG's approved business and strategic plans through regular reporting and review, but the governing legislation itself establishes the independence of the administrative decision making of the institution.

The Policy Framework – Governing Policy (VII.C2c.02) sets up a structure whereby the BoG has delegated approval of policies pertaining to academic matters to the GFC and administrative matters to the President and his Executive Team comprising the Provost, Vice Presidents, University Secretary, Chief Human Resource Officer, and President's Chief of Staff. In this way, decisions surrounding policy positions and supporting procedures on day-to-day academic and administrative powers are separate from the BoG.

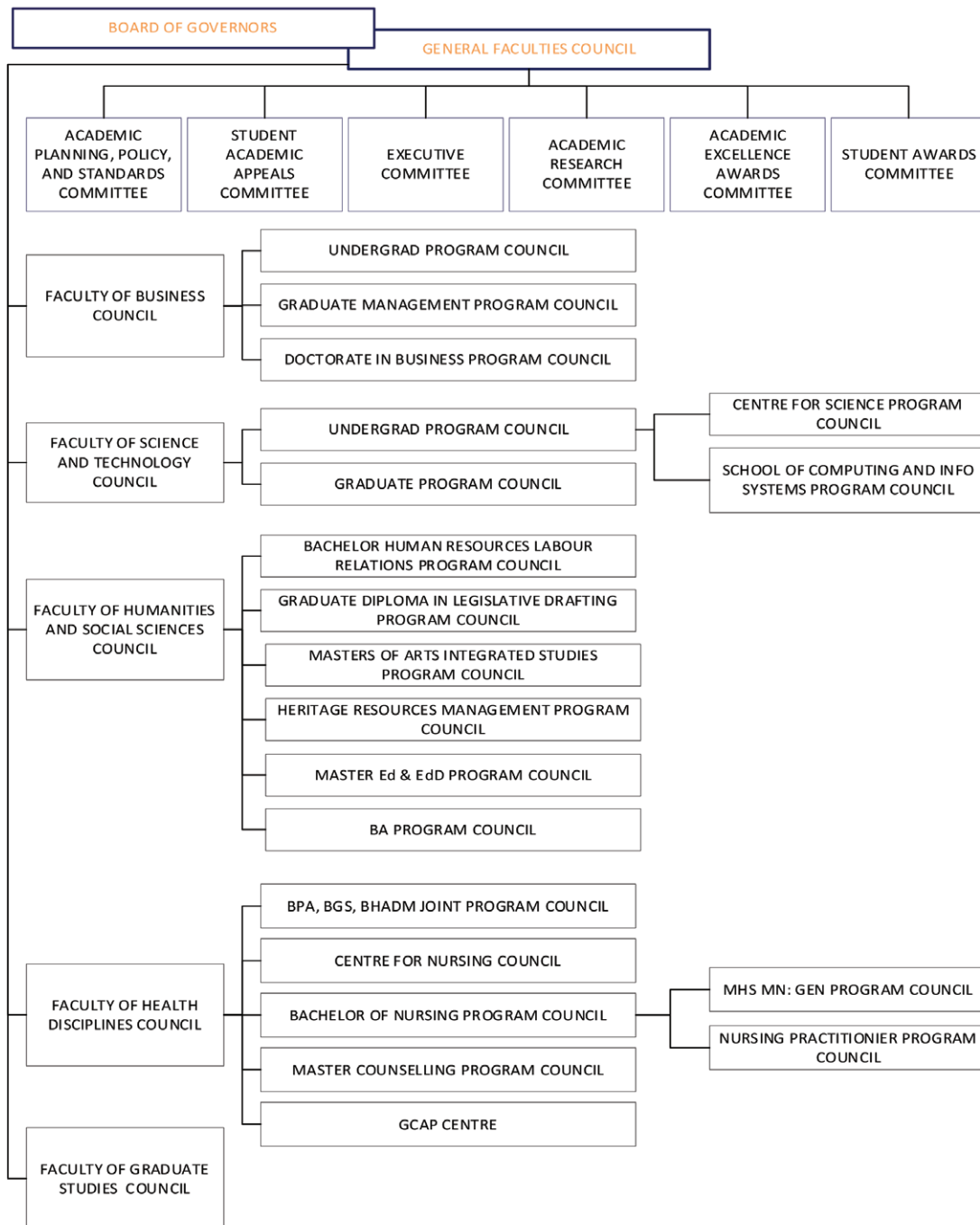
d. oversees at the policy level the quality of teaching and learning, the approval of degree programs and the awarding of degrees, the establishment of personnel policies and procedures, the approval of policies and by-laws, and the assurance of strong fiscal management;

The *Post-Secondary Learning Act (VII.C2d.01)* establishes in section 26 that the GFC, subject to the authority of the BoG, “is responsible for the academic affairs of the University,” including the authority to determine all programs of studies, timetables for examinations, lectures and other instruction in each faculty, grant and confer degrees, and prepare and publish the [University Calendar](#).

and responsibilities. There are also various Faculty and Program Councils which provide insight and expertise and support operational decision making with respect to teaching and learning, as well as human resource related decisions for faculty and academic staff, and input into the Integrated Resource Planning process. The figure below sets out the interplay between GFC and the various supporting decision-making and advisory bodies.

GFC is supported by its standing committees, which have delegated decision-making and advisory roles

Figure 2 GFC Support and Advisory Bodies



The Board Human Resources and Compensation Committee (HRCC) terms of reference ([VII.C2d.02](#)) establishes it as the Committee that assists the BoG with the review, recommendation, and approval of personnel policies within the BoG's purview while delegating the approval of administrative level human resource policies to the President and Executive Team as per the Policy Framework – Governing Policy.

e. plays a basic policy-making role in financial affairs to ensure integrity and strong financial management. This may include a timely review of audited financial statements and/or other documents related to the fiscal viability of the institution;

The *Post-Secondary Learning Act* ([VII.C2e.01](#)) requires that the BoG prepare, approve, and submit to the provincial government an annual budget. Through its Terms of Reference, the Board Finance and Property Committee ([VII.C2e.02](#)) is the standing committee that is mandated to make recommendations on several financial matters. These recommendations include approval of tuition and other fees, financial support for new academic programs, annual operating and capital resource plans, including the Integrated Resource Plan (IRP), as well as the approval of policies governing finance and budget matters.

The BoG is the legal entity accountable for financial management and integrity of AU, and it fulfills its obligations in a number of ways. It reviews and approves the Financial Statements each year and reviews and approves the IRP developed through AU's Integrated Planning Framework. It receives and reviews quarterly variance and year-end forecast reports as part of the University's overall accountability framework, providing the Board of Governors with regular reports on the University's financial operations as compared to the BoG approved IRP.

Clear decision-making and roles and responsibilities with respect to financial management are supported by approved policy. Included in these policies are both BoG policies such as the *Enterprise Risk Management Policy* ([VII.C2e.03](#)), and the *Delegation of Expenditure Approval Authority Policy* ([VII.C2e.04](#)), and administrative policies such as the *Contract Administration Policy* ([VII.C2e.05](#)), and *Purchasing Policy* ([VII.C2e.06](#)). All financial policies are part of the comprehensive review of all policies to align with the new Policy Framework. Most

recently, the BoG approved the revised *Investment Policy* ([VII.C2e.07](#)) and *Net Assets (Liabilities) Policy* ([VII.C2e.08](#)).

f. appoints and regularly evaluates the performance of the Chief Executive Officer;

The BoG is empowered in accordance with section 81(1) of the *Post-Secondary Learning Act* ([VII.C2f.01](#)) to appoint and reappoint the President, and, with the assistance of an advisory committee, make the final decisions with respect to appointment and reappointment. The HRCC has delegated the responsibility to approve the annual Performance Accountability Plan ([VII.C2f.02](#)) and oversees the review and evaluation of the President in consideration of the goals and objectives established by the President for the previous year in the Performance Accountability Plan and the milestones and deliverables set out in the University's overarching strategic plan.

Strong policy is in place to support the BoG in the appointment and evaluation of the President, and the BoG ensures that appointment, reappointment, and evaluation are done in accordance with them. The suite of policies relating to this are the *Advisory Search Committee for President Policy* ([VII.C2f.03](#)), *Advisory Committee for the Reappointment of the President Policy* ([VII.C2f.04](#)), and, *Presidential Performance Evaluation Policy* ([VII.C2f.05](#)), with the latter two being revised and approved by the BoG in 2019 to align with changes to the legislation and overall strategic direction of the institution.

g. is informed in all its operations by principles of good practice in board governance;

Sound, transparent, and accountable decision-making are key to the governance structures in place at AU. All decision-making is guided by the overall *IMAGINE* plan of the University. The President plays a key role in ensuring alignment between the governing bodies, and is a member of the BoG, and the Chair, *ex officio*, of GFC in accordance with the *Athabasca University Regulation* ([VII.C2g.01](#)). The President is responsible for transmitting any recommendations from GFC to the BoG pursuant to section 26(2) of the Act and provides a report from GFC at each BoG meeting.

AU's Integrated Planning Framework ([VII.C2g.02](#)) covers all aspects of academic and administrative

operations. As noted in Standard VI, Administrative Council plays a key role in ensuring that the Integrated Planning Framework informs all decision-making, and that institutional priorities and resources are aligned with overarching strategic plans and frameworks. The Integrated Planning Framework allows for the assessment of current needs and to anticipate future needs. By supporting the execution, assessment and accountability cycle, it enables AU to be agile in response to opportunities and challenges, thus ensuring strategic alignment, continuous improvement, and appropriate use of resources.

Good governance is also guided by the robust enterprise risk management program to ensure that consistent due diligence methodology is applied to decision-making, and risk is properly mitigated to limit impacts on the planned strategic goals and objectives. The *Enterprise Risk Management Policy* (VII.C2g.03) and its related procedures set out methodologies for assessing risk. The BoG approves the primary risk rankings on an annual basis, and reviews quarterly the Enterprise Risk Management Summary Reports to monitor regularly potential risks to the institution.

h. establishes and complies with a written conflict of interest policy designed to ensure the impartiality of the governing body by addressing matters such as payment for services, contractual relationships, employment, and family, financial or other interests that could pose or be perceived as conflicts of interest;

In 2017, the Provincial Government made amendments to the *Conflicts of Interest Act*, R.S.A. 2000, c. C-23 (VII.C2h.01). It required all agencies, boards, and commissions, including The Governors of Athabasca University, submit Codes of Conduct to the Office of the Ethics Commissioner for review. AU undertook a comprehensive revision of the codes of conduct for the institution to align with the requirements of the legislation. In August 2019, the new *Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for the Board of Governors* (VII.C2h.02) and *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* (VII.C2h.03) were approved by the BoG.

The *Code of Conduct and Conflict of Interest Guidelines for the Board of Governors* (VII.C2h.02) defines the standards of conduct expected of all BoG members with respect to ethical conduct and Conflicts of Interest (actual, potential and perceived conflicts of interest) when carrying out responsibilities and

duties for or on behalf of the BoG. It applies to all Members, including all committee members and the President when acting as a Member. Each Member must complete an Acknowledgement and Agreement Form (VII.C2h.05) acknowledging and agreeing that they have received a copy of the *Code*, will conscientiously and in good faith observe the provisions of the *Code*, and that a breach of the *Code* may result in remedial action up to and including a request for resignation or a recommendation for removal from the Board.

The *Code of Conduct for Members of the University Community* (VII.C2h.03) governs the conduct of members of the University community as well as establishes basic principles respecting the recognition, reporting and management of Conflicts of Interest. Members of GFC and its respective committees, as well as other decision-making, advisory, and consultative bodies within the institution must adhere to this Code. At each meeting, members are asked to declare any conflict they may have with respect to particular agenda items on the meeting agenda.

i. supports the Chief Executive officer in maintaining the autonomy of the institution;

By legislation, the President is responsible for the overall operations of AU, while remaining accountable to the BoG through regular reporting and annual evaluation. The BoG has delegated to the President the authority for managing the operations of the institution, and delegated approval authority for all administrative policies. By delegating these powers to the President, operational decision-making remains independent from the governing bodies, and is guided by approved administrative policies and procedures.

The Role of the President at AU is also clearly articulated and shared as part of his accountability plan. It establishes that the President is responsible for creating and implementing strategic and integrated planning for the University, is responsible for engaging with governmental stakeholders and the municipal, provincial, and federal levels as well as other community stakeholders, and for engaging with internal stakeholders including staff, students, and the academy. The President also has a primary role in the leadership of the institution as a member of the governing bodies and head of the administrative branch, as well as a duty to promote and champion AU, and allocate human, technical, financial, and physical resources to enable fulfillment of the University's mission and mandate and promote long-term viability.

Criterion 3. A Chief Executive Officer who:

a. is appointed by, evaluated by, and reports to the governing body and shall not chair the governing body;

In accordance with the *Advisory Search Committee for President Policy (VII.C3a.01)* and following an international search, the BoG appointed Dr. Neil Fassina as President of Athabasca University. He took office October 11, 2016. In 2019, the provincial government amended legislation affecting the current terms of Dr. Fassina's contract, so the BoG commenced the processes for an amendment to his contract ending October 10, 2021, as well as for reappointment. In accordance with the *Advisory Committee for the Reappointment for the President Policy (VII.C3a.02)*, Dr. Fassina was appointed by the BoG President for a further 5-year term to commence October 11, 2021. In October 2020, Dr. Fassina announced his intention to join a post-secondary institution in British Columbia. A search for a new President is underway.

b. has appropriate credentials and professional experience consistent with the mission of the organization;

Dr. Fassina's credentials and professional experience are exemplary and include a PhD in Organizational Behaviour and Human Resource Management from the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, and BSc from the University of Calgary. He is a chartered professional in human resources (CPHR) and designated director through the Institute of Corporate Directors (ICD.D). His professional experience includes being a tenured associate professor with the I. H. Asper School of Business at the University of Manitoba and a visiting assistant professor at the University of Calgary. Prior to being appointed the President of Athabasca University, Dr. Fassina served as the Dean of the JR Shaw School of Business and School of Culinary Arts and was Provost and Vice President Academic at the Northern Alberta Institute of Technology.

c. has the authority and autonomy required to fulfill the responsibilities of the position, including developing and implementing institutional plans, staffing the organization, identifying and allocating resources, and directing the institution toward attaining the goals and objectives set forth in its mission;

The President has the inherent authority to manage the operations of AU designated by legislation, as well as the delegated authority for administrative decision-making from the BoG.

d. has the assistance of qualified administrators, sufficient in number, to enable the Chief Executive Officer to discharge his/her duties effectively; and is responsible for establishing procedures for assessing the organization's efficiency and effectiveness.

In 2017 and 2018, searches were undertaken for individuals to fill the following positions:

- Provost and Vice President, Academic
- Vice President, Information Technology and Chief Information Officer
- Chief Human Resource Officer
- Vice President, Finance and Administration and Chief Financial Officer
- Vice President, University Relations

By 2019 all positions were filled. The Provost and Vice Presidents complete the Executive Team, joining the President and University Secretary to effectively and efficiently manage all aspects of the administration of AU. In addition to the Executive Team, the Office of the President includes his Senior Executive Assistant and Chief of Staff.

Criterion 4: An administration possessing or demonstrating:

a. an organizational structure that is clearly defined and that clearly defines reporting relationships;

- AU's organizational structure clearly sets out reporting relationships and accountabilities. It clearly shows the separation between the governing bodies and the administrative branch, and the reporting relationship through the President between the two branches.
- The administrative and operational branch flows from the President and each member of the Executive Team and each Faculty has clearly established teams relating to their areas of expertise and reporting structures under them. In addition, advisory groups that provide support to decision-making such as Administrative Council and Dean's Council are clearly identified as to whom they report to.

- The Provost and Vice President's Academic Leadership Team is the hub for all academic operations and administration. It includes the newly appointed Deputy Provost, Academic Operations, the Associate Vice President Research, Associate Vice President Academic Resources, and Associate Vice President Integrated Planning and Assessment, as well as the Faculty Deans.
- The Vice Presidents lead teams that support their areas of expertise. Each has dedicated teams to fulfill their roles and mandates.
- The Organizational Chart included in the Evidence Inventory ([VII.C4a.01](#)).

b. an appropriate size and with relevant experience to assist the Chief Executive Officer in fulfilling his/her roles and responsibilities;

AU has a complement of high-quality, dedicated staff to ensure that the roles and responsibilities for the administration and operation of the institution are fulfilled. Each administrative business area supporting the Executive Team, along with the Associate Vice Presidents, Deputy Provost, and Faculty Lead Teams supporting the Provost-Vice President Academic is staffed with individuals of high caliber, who bring experience and subject matter expertise to their roles. This is evidenced by the clear roles and reporting relationships set out in AU's Organizational Chart.

As noted in Standard I, several optimizations of teams are underway to support the implementation of AU's Integrated Learning Environment. Executive Team is currently reviewing and redesigning excluded leadership and support roles and structures. Reviewing or modifying job roles, reporting structures, and/or team composition will enable us to achieve the Integrated Learning Environment Program.

c. members with credentials and professional experience consistent with the mission of the organization and their functional roles;

Human Resources oversees the recruitment of all administrative staff and ensures that each recruitment results in the hiring of qualified personnel who meet the job requirements of each position. Job descriptions must align with strategic directions, and as such, candidates are assessed whether they have the necessary skills and

experience to meet those aligned requirements. Learning Services Tutorial ([VII.C4c.01](#)) is responsible for recruitment of academic tutors and subject matter experts and ensures that they meet the necessary qualifications to support learners in their courses and educational journeys.

d. skills, time, assistance, technology, and information systems expertise required to perform their duties;

In furtherance of *RISE* ([VII.C4d.01](#)), AU continues its digital modernization by providing better security, reliability, flexibility, scalability, and accessibility for our 100% online learning environment. The AWS collaboration includes a voluntary training program for all employees, including the executive team, to facilitate a better understanding of how cloud-based technologies could be utilized in our ongoing strategic and operational planning. To date, 400 employees have participated in the program.

e. regular engagement with faculty and student in advancing the institution's goals and objectives;

There are several ways faculty and students at AU are engaged in relation to the institution's strategic goals and initiatives. As part of the integrated planning process, faculty are engaged regularly through the review of their Faculty's operational plans to identify successes and challenges relating to the strategic goals and outcomes of the institution. They are also engaged in operational planning to ensure alignment with strategic initiatives and goals for the following year. The Provost and Vice President Academic holds meetings twice monthly with the Academic Leadership Team, consisting of the Provost, Deans, and Associate Vice Presidents to discuss academic affairs. Additionally, administration regularly holds labour management meetings with unions and associations.

Students are also engaged as part of the integrated planning process through student planning consultations as described in Standard VI. As well, the President, Provost and Vice President Academic Deputy Provost, and Deans hold quarterly meetings with the AUSU and the AUGSA.

Other touchpoints between the administration and faculty in relation to developments and opportunities on strategic initiatives and goals are described in Standard VI.

f. systematic procedures for evaluating administrative units and for using assessment data to enhance operations.

As noted in Standard VI, assessment at the unit level occurs systematically as a component of the integrated planning cycle. In addition, each spring, AU administers an annual Employee Engagement Survey, carried out by a third party to ensure anonymity of responses. This survey serves as a foundational tool to enable the Executive Team and business units to assess what is working and where challenges are impacting operations. The results are shared with Executive Team and the broader University Community to ensure everyone is aware of successes and challenges in an open and transparent way. For example, data on a global level was shared, and sessions were held by the independent third-party to discuss the results. Questions were encouraged, and these recorded sessions remain available to all staff ([VII.C4f.02](#), [VII.C4f.03](#)). Work-unit level data was also shared with each work unit for more focused feedback. The survey and feedback loops allow participation by all levels of staff across the University to identify areas where improvements are required for effective and efficient operations, as well as potential improvements to enhance what is already working effectively.

As well, the President holds monthly online Connect with the President sessions ([VII.C4f.01](#)). This engagement provides a forum for updates on the progress of institutional initiatives and goals, and for regular feedback to identify successes and opportunities for improvement in relation to those goals.

Criterion 5. Periodic assessment of the effectiveness of governance, leadership, and administration.

The BoG Bylaws ([VII.C5.01](#)) set out the processes to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the BoG and its committees, and the members in fulfilling their responsibilities. Each Member is expected to participate in the evaluation process, overseen by the Board Governance Committee. This process includes the annual BoG self-assessment on the performance of the BoG, its standing committees and individual BoG Members. Results are reported to the BoG by the BoG Chair.

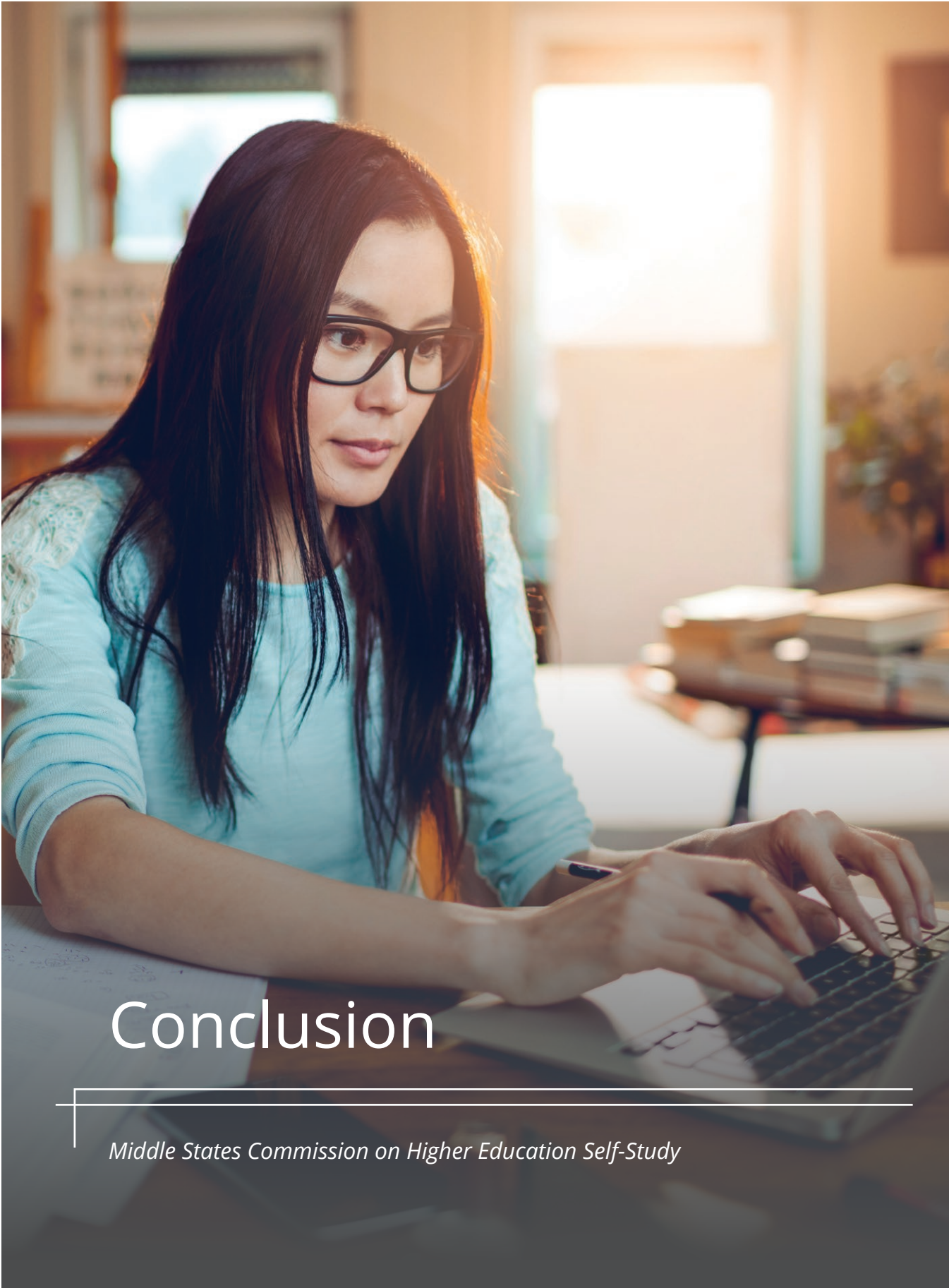
The BoG Bylaws are reviewed by the Board Governance Committee at least once every three (3) years and any changes are recommended to the BoG for approval. In addition, the BoG and GFC Committees are required to review their terms of reference at least once every three years.

In response to a sector-wide recommendation in 2013 by Alberta's Office of the Auditor General to monitor compliance with legislation, AU developed a Legislative Compliance Framework ([VII.C5.02](#)), which was approved by the BoG in 2015. This Framework sets out reporting requirements for assessing compliance and monitoring risk for all applicable legislation and regulations related to university operations. The Annual Legislative Compliance Report prepared each year is presented to the BoG, the BoG Audit Committee, GFC, the Council and Executive Team. Through this annual reporting, administration can identify areas of strength and those requiring attention or mitigation efforts to ensure continued compliance and alignment with legislated obligations to support effective operations ([VII.C5.03](#), [VII.C5.04](#)).

Administrative and academic staff participate in periodic engagement surveys to provide information to leadership and governing bodies for review and planning for continuous improvement. The most recent assessment was done after a university-wide Employee Engagement Survey was conducted by an independent third-party in 2020. As noted in Standard VI, AU is committed to undertaking employee engagement surveys on an annual basis.

Opportunities for Improvement and Innovation

1. Ensure that faculty, staff, and students understand the governance and decision-making structures of the University so that they can make their voices heard within the decision-making processes.



Conclusion

Middle States Commission on Higher Education Self-Study

Conclusion

Athabasca University started preparing its current Self-Study for Middle States in 2019. Approximately 42 people, including faculty, staff, and students, have been engaged in preparing the report. Working groups reviewed the institution's policies and practices and made suggestions for improvements, where necessary. The Self-Study provides an opportunity to identify areas of challenge and strength and highlights an array of accomplishments over the past five years. The final product is a reflection of the University's mission and commitment to provide lifelong learning opportunities to learners in Alberta, Canada, and beyond.

Opportunities for Ongoing Institutional Improvement and Innovation

1. Continue to contribute to the decolonization of the academy in ways recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada in its Calls to Action.
2. Actualize Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) principles expressed in AU's EDI Framework.
3. Support AU's transformation, most notably the OneAU Service Model changes, reconfigurations, reorganizations, reviews, and engagements through effective planning, communication, and risk management for the entire change process.
4. Decrease manual interventions and create guidelines and criteria in relation to performance measures to enhance the annual performance assessment process. Areas for innovation and improvement in relation to the employee life cycle include the opportunity to expand, expedite, and digitize the on-boarding experience and off-boarding process.
5. Implement the planned transformation in the Student Learning Experience (ES.0.07). AU's new Integrated Learning Environment (ES.0.04) will enable technology-based tools to facilitate proactive student support in a personal and scalable way, connecting learners to the support they need as they need it.
6. Leverage technology to create access, enhance open and distributed learning environments, and build collaborative and coordinated environments and networks to achieve coherence in the student learning experience and the synthesis of learning. The *IMAGINE* plan does not see a separation between education and the rest of a learner's life; rather, it views learners as life-long learners whose engagement with Athabasca University does not end with the completion of a course or a credential.
7. Provide graduate learners with increased research collaboration opportunities, support in research ethics processes, and increased support for research dissemination.
8. Establish and refine processes to ensure learners benefit from more robust and accessible financial supports from AU, including improved advice on the availability of financial supports in the form of scholarships, bursaries, grants, and research assistantships.
9. AU has the opportunity to improve Transfer Credit and Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition technologies. Reducing time required for the Transfer Credit and the Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition processes would further improve student experience.
10. Design an institution-wide Learning Outcomes Assessment infrastructure that supports the emerging Integrated Learning Environment.
11. Improve institutional effectiveness structures and assessment practices by implementing an institutional-level assessment process.
12. Ensure that faculty, staff, and students understand the governance and decision-making structures of the University so that they can make their voices heard within decision-making processes.



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