

# Athabasca University

---

## Strategic Research Plan Summary 2006-2011

---

### ***Major Objectives of Strategic Research Plan***

Athabasca University is committed to expanding our capacity as a research institution, and our overall Strategic University Plan (SUP) 2006-2011, on which our University Research Plan is based, provides a framework for a viable and purposeful research agenda. Within this framework, over the next five years Athabasca University will foster and expand its research and scholarship. At the same time, the University will continue to support provincial research goals, to reflect the priorities of national research councils, and to participate in federal government initiatives.

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

This **Strategic Research Plan Summary** is based upon the larger University Research Plan 2006-2011 submitted to the CFI and CRC (<http://www.athabascau.ca/aboutAU/strategicdocs.php>).

In line with the research goals embedded in its Research Plan, the University will:

1. Foster a healthy research culture within Athabasca University.
2. Increase supports to cultivate student and staff excellence in research and scholarship.
3. Enhance Athabasca University's international profile in open and distance learning research and scholarship.
4. Promote the exploration and dissemination of knowledge for the benefit of society.
5. Provide the widest possible access to Athabasca University research.
6. Build research partnerships with appropriate organizations and institutions provincially, nationally and internationally.
7. Develop a clear and viable strategy to seek and allocate research funding.

While the general direction of these initiatives is under the direction of the Associate Vice-President, Research, their realization will depend on the actions of Faculties, centres, committees, academics, and staff that make up the research infrastructure at Athabasca University.

### ***Major Thrusts of Research and Research Training***

In addition to the research goals identified above, the University remains committed to the research priority areas initially identified in the *University Research Plan (2002-2005)*:

- **Open, Distance, and eLearning** – This research focus, the cornerstone of the University Research Plan, is distributed broadly among the academic staff at the university. Professors who are practitioners in open, distance, and e-learning education are keen to study the factors that contribute to success and failure for students, course design, and

learning in online environments. Areas of focus include theory and practice of online learning, mobile learning, technology enhanced learning, adaptivity and personalization in informatics, semantic technologies, course design and development, social networking, and workplace learning;

- **Indigenous Studies** – This research emphasis centres on asserting traditional Indigenous (including First Nation and Metis) languages, cultures and laws, including, among other topics, research on Aboriginal ways of knowing and passing on knowledge from generation to generation, Aboriginal environmental knowledge and its importance to goals of environmental sustainability, and the creation of integral programs of Aboriginal knowledge within a framework of Western-based educational institutions. It also includes law and government of First Nation and Metis peoples—working with traditional leaders and Elders to determine the traditional roots of contemporary understandings, self-determination, and sovereignty;
- **Space Science and Astronomy** – Research includes the exploration of electric currents associated with auroras; impact processes, craters, remote sensing; mathematical modelling and scientific data analysis, and instrumentation. Existing alliances of our research academics with key players in this field at major research universities in the United States and Canada have generated data that are critical for the understanding of space science and astronomy in Canada.

Other research areas of emphasis for the university include the following:

- Environment and Sustainability;
- Globalization and Cultural Studies
- Workplace and Community Education
- Nursing and Health Management Research
- Labour/Canadian Studies.
- Business, Management and Leadership

At the same time, the University recognizes the importance of supporting new and emerging areas such as interdisciplinary inquiry; areas of research that have emerged since the previous Plan; and changes resulting from new funding initiatives and evolving societal concerns. Building on the above priority areas we are continuing to grow our research capacity.

### **Research Training**

The development of scholarship, research, innovation and research training is an essential component of the University's Strategic Plan. CRCs provide leadership and play a vital role in enhancing research and research training, and attracting and retaining other outstanding researchers, which in turn leads to the development of new areas of excellence in research, and ultimately strengthens synergies between teaching and learning. The development of intellectual capital at AU occurs in a number of ways: 1) through the research projects and theses of our graduate students, 2) through the involvement of our senior undergraduate students in professorial research, and 3) through the use of Postdoctoral Fellows as members of research teams. This leads to the development of highly qualified personnel, many of whom bring with them substantial professional experience. Through our research training initiatives, AU is able to contribute to increasing Canada's talent pool and research infrastructure, and thereby enhancing Canada's productivity and global competitiveness.

### **Gender Representation**

Athabasca University is committed to the principle of gender equity and ensures that gender considerations are an integral part of any faculty searches. Over 45% of our full-time teaching staff is female (as reported to Statistics Canada Oct 2008). In addition, Athabasca University is

committed to providing a gender balance in our awards, and provides a supportive environment to women researchers. As part of our CRC nomination process we have encouraged and invited applications from female candidates, through an open and broad competition process. Currently AU has four CRC Tier II allocations and as more positions become available the University will actively maintain an appropriate gender balance.

### ***Distribution of Canada Research Chairs (CRC)***

The identification of specific themes in mission critical and disciplinary research has given AU an opportunity to access CRC funding and strategically select leaders who are outstanding in their field. AU was awarded one SSHRC Tier 2 Chair and one Special Tier 1 Chair (which has been split into one NSERC Tier 2 Chair and one SSHRC Tier 2 Chair), and most recently, one Tier II Special Chair.

The following is a breakdown of the University's current and proposed allocation of Canada Research Chairs:

<b>Areas of Research Focus</b>	<b>Tier</b>	<b>Granting Pool</b>
Research in Open, Distance and E-Learning	II	SSHRC -Appointed Jan. 2001
Space Science and Instrumentation	II	NSERC -Appointed Oct. 2002 Renewed March 2008
Semantic Technologies	II	NSERC -Appointed Jan 2009
Indigenous Traditional Knowledge, Legal Orders, and Laws	II	SSHRC – One nomination in progress to fill new position

The university's commitment to excellence is already evident in the areas of Open, Distance and E-Learning, with Semantic Technologies as a technical subset in this area, and Space Science where the existing chairs have been allocated. The Chair in Indigenous Studies will serve to focus on developing research in aboriginal issues. This will allow us to provide a major contribution and support to Indigenous scholarship in the area of law, administration and governance. We will build on the strong theoretical research contributions of the proposed Chair, pulling together oral tradition, history and understanding, and connecting them in a theoretical way to Western traditions.

Using our CRCs' demonstrable leadership and expertise to attract and retain highly qualified scholars and students who are internationally recognized in their field, we will continue to expand and enhance our current research capacity in the areas of Open, Distance and E-learning. In addition, the current CRC in Space Science and Instrumentation will serve as an anchoring position, to help us further develop research in computer-based sciences. The research program of the proposed CRC in Indigenous Studies is aimed at defining and identifying Indigenous citizens marginalized by diasporas in the context of the colonization of Indigenous peoples, examining the relationships between Indigenous Knowledge, Indigenous ways of knowing, and Indigenous practice related to lawful conduct (behaviour in accordance with the principles, values, traditions and philosophies of Indigenous nations). The development of a body of Indigenous Legal Knowledge allows for information emancipation, an effect which will benefit the borderland populations, their Indigenous home nations, and the Canadian public.

Excellence and fit with the University Research Plan will be the basis on which we will fill the chair positions. Should subsequent positions become available the University is committed to examining alternative research possibilities. As the AU research agenda evolves, a chair will be targeted in the natural sciences (one Tier I or Tier II), to complement the current CRC in Space Sciences and to form a cluster, followed by an additional CRC position in Indigenous Studies (Tier II) in keeping with the research priority areas identified in our *University Research Plan*.

***Support for development of research and research training in areas of research focus:***

AU views a strong research effort as part of its mission. Institutional funds in support of research are available through a combination of sources. All faculty members are entitled to up to 30 days combined Professional Development and Annual Research Leave. The Annual Research Leave is normally taken as a block of time to allow for a short, intensive focus on specific research questions. The professional development leave has fewer restrictions. In addition to Annual Research Leave and Professional Development Leave, each faculty member accumulates two months Research and Study Leave for each year worked (generally taken after 5 or 6 years service) allowing extended periods of time dedicated exclusively to research. When Research and Study Leave (sabbatical) is taken, travel funding is available. Each of these various support mechanisms encourages collaboration with other researchers. As a distance learning university, AU has particular expertise in supporting researchers over distributed networks and as such international collaborations is encouraged and facilitated.

In addition, the university provides financial support internally through the Academic Professional Development Fund and the Academic Research Fund, and other seed/special funds available through the Research Centre. CRCs also have access to a special Mission Critical Research Fund that is aimed at supporting research related to the mission of the university. The university also facilitates student research support through the Graduate Student Research Fund. These student applications are adjudicated, and awards made, by a committee composed of appointed faculty members.

So that they may focus on research initiatives Chairs typically have reduced teaching duties and are provided with a CRC Research Stipend to conduct their research as well as for the hiring of research assistants/associates. With respect to non-financial support Chairs are provided with office/research space, computer/systems access, server space, and high bandwidth connectivity necessary to conduct their research.

Moreover, the Research Centre staff actively works with each CRC to search out, and apply for further research funding. This support includes finding appropriate sources of matching funding both internally and externally as well as professional help in the scoping out and writing of proposals. In addition, the Research Centre provides ongoing administrative/financial services support for the CRCs and their assistants/associates. Furthermore, Athabasca University supports the research goals of CRCs through the sharing of research equipment. .

***Inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaborations:***

Athabasca University encourages inter-institutional and inter-sectoral collaborations, and as noted above, has identified building research partnerships with appropriate organizations and institutions provincially, nationally and internationally, as one of its research goals. To date AU has engaged in research initiatives with private sector partners, regional and national academic institutions, local industry, and works with both Federal and Provincial governments to build capacity in these areas. In addition, AU is involved in collaborative international projects

involving institutions, organizations and Institutes in the European Union, the Commonwealth and the United States.

Other successes include the partnerships developed by our current CRCs. Teams of research specialists often cannot be assembled in a single small university as there are normally only a few specialists in any defined research area in any centre. In response to this limitation, and partly arising from its expertise in online learning, AU faculty have developed considerable expertise in online collaboration with like-minded researchers at universities within the province, Canada and around the world.

In addition, we are participating in multi-institutional CFI/ASRIP funded projects (e.g. high performance computing/computer grids and digital technologies in the social sciences and humanities), and faculty members are involved in a multi-institutional and multi-disciplinary funded research. Future initiatives are planned for both within the province as well as internationally.

### ***Assessment of Objectives***

Using the outcomes identified in our full **University Research Plan** to monitor our progress, over the next five years Athabasca University will demonstrate the following key achievements:

- The development of new centres of excellence and endowed chairs;
- new collaborative research projects involving provincial, national and international colleagues;
- a greater emphasis on research reflected in increased numbers of publications and presentations from academic staff and students and greater numbers of grants and awards; and
- more student involvement in research projects.

### ***Planning and approval process***

The Athabasca University Research Plan is a document which draws upon previous planning efforts, and is based on feedback and recommendations that emerged through committee appearances, institution-wide consultations, workshops and open forums carried out in 2006 in relation to the University's Strategic Plan, as well as previous drafts of the University Research Plan. Approval for the Plan followed the same general process as for all major plans at AU, and was achieved through a series of committee meetings leading to approval at Athabasca University Academic Council. In addition, the Academic Research Committee (ARC) played an integral role in preparing and moving the document forward for review by each of the respective Committees and stakeholder groups. The ARC, of which the Associate Vice President, Research is a member, is responsible for recommendations to AUAC concerning all research matters of concern to the university.

The resulting plan was reviewed by the Office of the Vice President Academic and was subsequently endorsed by the Academic Research Committee, Athabasca University Academic Council and Athabasca University Governing Council.