



**ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY**

**A CASE STUDY IN OPEN EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES PRODUCTION  
AND USE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CANADA**

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## **1.00 GENERAL BACKGROUND**

1. The origins of Athabasca University lie in the 1960s' rapid increase in university enrolments, which argued strongly for a fourth Alberta university. In response to these pressures, Athabasca University was created in 1970 by an order in council of the Government of Alberta.

Soon after, though, the growth in enrolments slowed, giving second thoughts about the development of another campus-based university. Instead, a pilot project was initiated to study new teaching and learning strategies for post-secondary students that would enable students to pursue their educational goals without leaving their homes, jobs or families.

The result was Athabasca University, a distance learning centre that would specialize in the delivery of distance education courses and programs. Six hundred and fifty students enrolled in the pilot project between 1972 and 1975. Athabasca University held its first convocation ceremony for two graduates in 1977.

Athabasca University's future was ensured in 1978, when a revision of the Alberta Universities Act granted the University permanent, self-governing status (approval in principle was given in 1975).

### **2. MISSION STATEMENT:**

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

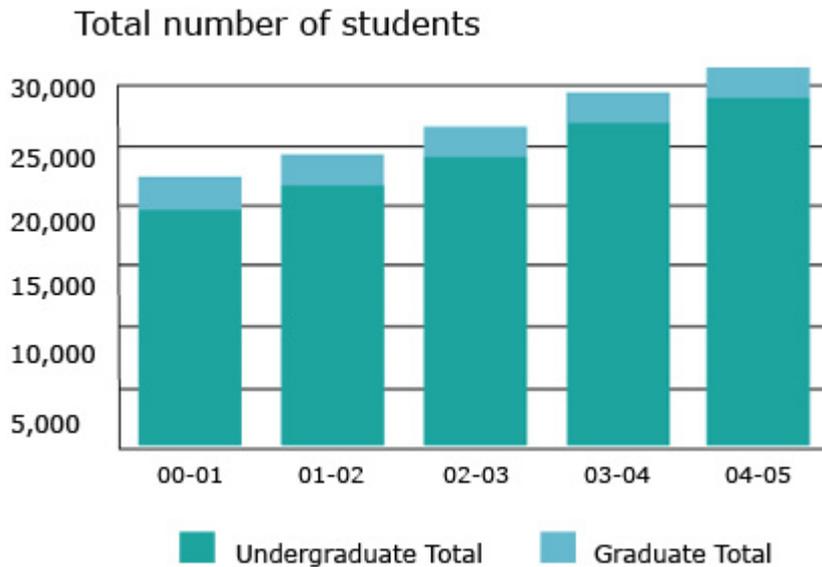
*We are committed to excellence in teaching, research and scholarship, and to being of service to the general public.*

3. More than 260,000 students have been served by the Athabasca University since 1970. In 2004-2005 32,000 students enrolled at Athabasca University. Of those 32,000, two-thirds were women. The average age of Athabasca students in 2004-2005 was 29, while 44% were under 25. Sixty % of Athabasca students worked full time. Thirty-six % of Athabasca undergraduates were visiting students who took Athabasca courses to transfer to their home institutions.

4. Athabasca University is authorized to grant degrees by the Government of Alberta. In Canada, Athabasca University is also accredited

by the Government of British Columbia. In the United States, Athabasca University is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education.

With a focus on liberal arts, sciences and professional programs, Athabasca University offers more than 700 courses as well as bachelor’s degrees, master’s degrees, and undergraduate and graduate certificates and diplomas.



<b>ATHABASCA STAFF</b>	
<b>31-Mar-05</b>	
<b>Total Number of Employees</b>	<b>1,075</b>
<b>Breakdown By Type</b>	
<b>Academic Full-Time</b>	<b>111</b>
<b>Academic Part-Time</b>	<b>148</b>
<b>Professional</b>	<b>152</b>
<b>Management and Executive</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Support and Temporary</b>	<b>284</b>
<b>Casual</b>	<b>86</b>
<b>Part-Time Tutors</b>	<b>276</b>

## **2.00 WHY ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY WAS CHOSEN**

Athabasca University was chosen as one of the cases to study, above all, for two reasons:

1. The institution fulfils three of the criteria listed in the guidelines:
  - a. It uses open educational resources (OER),
  - b. It produces OER
  - c. It uses open source software (OSS).
  
2. It is the only English Language exclusively “at-a-distance” university in Canada. Athabasca began primarily as a correspondence university and in the last five years has been migrating more and more of its offering on-line. Currently 150 of Athabasca’s 600 courses are available on line. Those 150 courses represent 80% of student activity.

### **3.00 STATE OF THE ART**

#### **a) Open Content Production**

Athabasca University is actively involved in major content production. All its courses are complete, modularized packages. With the exception of one on-line text-book, *Theory and Practice of Distance Education*, none of Athabasca's content is open. This text-book was authored by some fifteen faculty members primarily within the Centre for Distance Education and the Faculty of Business. The decision to provide this text-book was made by the faculty out of philosophical commitment to open content. It is licensed under Open Commons protocols.

This text-book has been extremely successful with over 70,000 downloads world-wide. It has been translated into 6 other languages.

University management supported the publication as an open resource in the face of the faculty commitment. The university intends to proceed with great caution in making any other course resources open.

Within the University's student services operation there are considerable on-line resources that while not explicitly branded as open, they are available to anyone on-line. These services include resources in developing skills as an academic writer and general university preparedness assessment.

The University also has a number of learning objects available on line. Again not explicitly labeled as open, they are available – if one can find them. Navigation to them is deliberately obscure in the hope that they are protected. When asked what could prevent my copying and using them the reply given the site visitor was "your conscience".

The University is attracted in principle to making its resources openly available. It is hesitant and extremely cautious at so doing because of a concern about the protection of its assets from the competition. Unlike institutions with more hybrid models of education i.e. lecture augmented with resources, Athabasca's full courses are packaged. 70% of Athabasca's revenue comes from tuition fees. The University believes its content is key to that on-going revenue.

Athabasca is particularly concerned with predatory, less than ethical, private, for-profit American universities already active in Canada. The University does not want to be in a position of being pressured to accept courses from such

entities on the ground that the courses are Athabasca's. Athabasca places strong value on the alignment of its course materials with the on-line support for students working with that content. Some people at Athabasca express strong reservations about the value of the content unhinged from the support.

Athabasca has participated in the Canadian Virtual University and has made content available in the past to Campus Alberta when that content production has been funded by the Government of Alberta expressly for open availability. The President clearly stated that he would have no difficulty making more open content available if he could count on only public universities could access it. He would trust public universities to make ethical use of that content and to cite its sources correctly. Being unable to prevent rapacious, unethical, for-profit organizations from profiting from content makes him unwilling to proceed with further opening of Athabasca's content at this time.

All content now produced at Athabasca meets CanCore and IEEE standards for meta-data. Athabasca has a rigorous quality assurance program. Again, content at Athabasca is not just a supporting feature of the main act, the lecture. At Athabasca the content is the course and it is completely instructionally designed.

Unlike most universities all instructional content at Athabasca is the property of the University.

## **b) Open Content Use**

The use of open content is not tracked at the University. Use is growing, but usually only as part of course materials. Course authors at Athabasca may select open content to include within Athabasca course with proper citation.

Although web use is certainly encouraged for Athabasca students, critical content found on the web by course authors will be actually copied and integrated on to Athabasca's own platform again with appropriate citation and permissions if required. Athabasca believes taking such content on to its own platform necessary because they have no guarantees that a third party host of such content will maintain its availability.

## Copyright Issues:

The Associate Vice-President Research, who in spirit is very much in favour of open source educational resources, expresses great concern that even within Canada's current copyright regime open source may not truly be possible. He notes that while "Fair Dealing" is legal in research it is not legal in teaching.

If Bill C60, which died on the House of Commons Order Paper, were to be reintroduced open source would become even more problematic. Bill C60 would require the receipt of permission to use anything. Short of every learning object, on-line resource, printed document having a clearly stated permission on each page permissions would need to be sought, making even the use of search engines and the citing of url's fraught with legal peril.

Athabasca has done some co-operative work with other universities in the Canadian Virtual University, Campus Alberta, and EduSource – a pilot project funded by CANARIE (Canada's highbandwidth network for research and education). In such projects Athabasca has found open source critical given the complexities of intellectual property issues in institutions where faculty retain rights over content.

More often than collaboration, Athabasca tends to enter into mutual course recognition agreements with other institutions.

### **c) Open Source Software Production**

Athabasca formerly engaged in the production of an open-source learning management system. It was eventually abandoned in the face of difficulties in engaging a significant user community.

Athabasca is no longer publishing open source software. It is, however, very significantly engaged in developing open source software within the user communities for U Portal, Clone, OJS, Apache, Linux, and Moodle.

The University is producing some proprietary software to supplement that which it acquires through the open source community or commercially. While it is proprietary, they have no objection to making open, but doubt there will be much of interest because it is software developed to suit Athabasca's unique circumstances.

#### **d) Open Source Software Use**

On the system side of its operation, the software used by Athabasca is approximately 50% open. At the desk-top level less than 10% of the software used is open. Microsoft Windows remains the standard because of ease of use and wide-spread familiarity.

There is a very strong commitment to open source software among the IT support staff at Athabasca. The CIO is happy to support that commitment provided the functionality required is available.

One of the major attractions of open-source software is the ability to customize it to Athabasca's specific need and to be engaged with a wide community of users in making improvements. Engagement in collaboration with other institutions in the creation of open source software but it is entirely within the context of the communities of users – particularly of Moodle.

After considerable debate and evaluation alternatives, Moodle has been adopted as a university standard.

## **4.0 CONCLUSION**

Athabasca University has a strong commitment to Open Source concepts on the research side of its activities. On the learning side of the operation, that commitment is severely tempered by concerns to protect the universities assets and fear of unethical competitors. It is extremely important to note that Athabasca's on-line content represents entire courses. This content is not support materials to conventional instruction as they are in many more traditional institutions.

The University is making extensive investments in Open Source through its very active participation in Open Source Communities.

There is strong will to proceed in an open manner at Athabasca University, but the progress in that direction will be measured and constantly evaluated in the light of ensuring the on-going viability of the Athabasca business model.

**Appendix 1**  
**List of Interviewees**

Dr. Fritz Pannekoek, President

Ms. Pat Eager, Vice-President Finance

Dr. Rory McGreal, Associate Vice-President Research

Dr. Terry Anderson, Professor

Dr. Heather Kanuka, Professor

Brian Stewart, Chief Information Officer

Dr. Nancy Parker, Executive Director, External Relations

**Useful Links**

[www.athabascau.ca](http://www.athabascau.ca)