The history of an English-speaking Canadian distance university: the Athabasca University
An interview with Nancy K. Parker

L'histoire d'une université à distance canadienne anglophone : l'Athabasca University – Entretien avec Nancy K. Parker

La historia de una universidad canadiense de educación a distancia en inglés: la Athabasca University – Entrevista con Nancy K. Parker

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ABSTRACT

In her interview, Nancy Parker outlines the origins of Athabasca University and its purpose. She describes the internal and external pressures the university has had to face over the years to become a fully online institution. Athabasca University's unique features are portrayed throughout the interview, to include serving rural and adult learners, emphasizing learning rather than teaching, using ongoing pedagogical research in instructional design to develop online content, committing to equality in education for adult learners through an open and rolling admission process, a high level of web-enabled self-service tools and call centres, and empowering students to create learning communities beyond physical and virtual boundaries.

Keywords: adult learners, equality, online learning, instruction, flexible and distributed learning

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet entretien, Nancy Parker relate les origines de l'Université d'Athabasca (*Athabasca University*) et ses objectifs. Elle décrit les pressions internes et externes auxquelles l'université a dû faire face au fil des ans pour devenir une institution entièrement en ligne. Les nombreuses particularités de l'Université d'Athabasca sont évoquées tout au long de l'entretien : servir des apprenants ruraux et adultes, mettre l'accent sur l'apprentissage plutôt que sur l'enseignement, mobiliser de façon continue la recherche en pédagogie lors de la conception pédagogique des contenus en ligne. La volonté d'assurer l'égalité dans l'éducation des apprenants adultes se concrétise par le processus d'admission ouvert et continu, l'accès à un grand nombre d'outils en libre-service et de centres d'appel sur le Web ainsi que la possibilité offerte aux étudiants de créer des communautés d'apprentissage au-delà des frontières physiques ou virtuelles.

Mots-clés : apprenants adultes, égalité, apprentissage en ligne, éducation, apprentissage flexible et distribué

RESUMEN

En esta entrevista, Nancy Parker habla de los orígenes de la Universidad de Athabasca (*Athabasca University*) y de sus objetivos. Describe las presiones internas y externas a las que se ha enfrentado la universidad a lo largo de los años para convertirse en una institución totalmente en línea. A lo largo de la entrevista, se comentan las numerosas características específicas de la Universidad de Athabasca: la atención a los alumnos rurales y adultos, el enfoque en el aprendizaje más que en la enseñanza, y la movilización continua de la investigación pedagógica para el diseño pedagógico de los contenidos en línea. El deseo de garantizar la igualdad en la educación de los estudiantes adultos se refleja en el proceso de admisión abierto y continuo, en el acceso a un gran número de herramientas de autoservicio y centros de atención en la web, y en la oportunidad de que los estudiantes creen comunidades de aprendizaje más allá de las fronteras físicas o virtuales.

Palabras clave: alumnos adultos, igualdad, e-learning, educación, aprendizaje flexible y distribuido

Nancy K. Parker earned a doctorate in History from York University in 1999 and served as the Director of Institutional Studies at Athabasca University from 2001 until 2019. She held an interim executive position in external relations in 2005-06 and continued to represent Athabasca University on various provincial advisory panels including serving on the President's Advisory Council for System Outcomes for Results Based Budgeting for Alberta's Ministry of Innovation and Advanced Education in 2013-14. She was active in shared governance activities at Athabasca University, including being elected chair of the Academic Research Committee, and working as the Co-chair for the comprehensive institutional self-study for the reaffirmation of the institution's accreditation with the Middle States Commission on Higher Education. She continues to serve as a peer reviewer and member of the Commission's substantive change committee. Research groups she actively participated with examined the impacts of Athabasca University's Learning to Learn Online (LTLO.ca) MOOC and developed an Academic Analytics Tool. She has published in the

fields of Criminal Justice History, Quality Assurance, and Academic Analytics and is currently working on an historical monograph about Athabasca University.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **Could you talk about the origin of Athabasca University? When was it founded? What was the educational context at the time and the purpose of a distance university in Canada? Who was Athabasca University created for?**

NANCY PARKER: The first proposals for a fourth public university in Alberta came in the contexts of rapid enrolment expansion during 1960's (when post-secondary enrolments more than tripled), an emphasis on human resource development, and lobby efforts by an interdenominational group seeking to promote stronger moral foundations in higher education. The Order in Council establishing Athabasca University was passed in June 1970. However, the first concept of a primarily undergraduate campus North-East of the town of St. Albert emphasizing interdisciplinary and professional studies did not survive the change from a Social Credit to a Progressive Conservative government in Alberta. In 1972, then president Dr T.C. Byrne[1] was able to persuade the new government to allow a pilot program to investigate the viability of alternative delivery for rural and adult learners. The new institution was approved in principle in 1975 but did not receive a permanent mandate until 1978 (OC 434/78).

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **Can you describe what Athabasca University was like at the beginning? Who were the main stakeholders? How was distance education organised then?**

NANCY PARKER: A key principle in the design of the institution's 1971 Academic Concept was that those "responsible for the structures and processes of education should stress learning rather than teaching." The interdisciplinary, problems-based approach was meant to "free the university from its geographical confines" by "organizing intellectual and emotional experiences for its students within lines of communication reaching into the many communities which make up its constituency."

After the shift away from campus development, Athabasca University focused on serving the needs of adult learners, first with a proof of concept, and then with ongoing pedagogical research that exploited the affordances of evolving communication technologies. In 1973 modules for Athabasca University's first course "World Ecology" were published in the *Edmonton Journal*. The full course took more than two years to develop and enrolments dropped off as enrolled students waited for modules. The materials were developed with teams with pedagogical emphasize on "objectives-based instruction" and "mastery learning" adapted from the behaviourist model of the Keller method. Modules were sent out as soon as they were available and included texts, study questions, cassette recordings and/or video taped materials. Telephone and/or field tutorial support was provided with instructors travelling to different communities where a cohort of students might gather.

In 1974, there were roughly 400 learners in progress in courses, and less than half resided in the Edmonton area. Most were in their mid-thirties and in contrast with other post-secondary institutions at that time, there were more women than men attending.

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[1] Editor's note: A book written by Dr T.C. Byrne about Athabasca University: Byrne, T.C. (1989). *Athabasca University; The Evolution of Distance Education*. Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press. https://archive.org/details/athabascaunivers0000byrn

Access Television was originally to be a key stakeholder, but the partnership did not evolve as expected even though some course materials were part of the regular broadcasts. The 1975 mandate also directed Athabasca University to work with the University of Alberta and the University of Calgary to test the utility of "computer assisted instruction/learning for program delivery."

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **What have been the main changes at Athabasca University over the years, what have been the main milestones and which roles have these played in the development of the institution?**

NANCY PARKER:

The easiest way to answer your question is to list here after the main milestones of the Athabasca University history.

1972 – Pilot started.

1977 – First regional office opens in Ft McMurray; Partnership delivery with community colleges inspire additional course development.

1978 – Permanent Mandate granted.

1980 – Move to town of Athabasca announced, President Smith and long serving members of the Board resign. Project Re-Deal initiates systematic exploration of different learner support models. Academic staff designation includes professionals and course coordinators.

1984 – Athabasca Campus opens; crippling tensions develop between those who move to the town and those who choose to commute. Strong emphasis on community learning hubs and outreach including agreement with Correctional Services of Canada.

1993 – Drastic cuts under Premier Ralph Klein mean 31% budget reduction and talk of potential disestablishment; Organizational structure flattened with Faculty structure shifted to centre model. Faculty research allocations scaled back to focus primarily on "mission critical" subject areas. Sixty-seven percent of the 10,974 students are residents in the province of Alberta.

1994 – First Graduate Programs (Master of Distance Education and Master of Business Administration Open) on 'cost recovery' basis. MBA program converts Lotus business solutions into a learning platform and operates out of rental space in St. Albert. MDE experiments with different learning platforms. Number of courses and programs expanded. Computing Services Help Desk and Faculty of Business establish call centres to respond to student support needs. General Information Centre developed the following year.

2000 – Launch of The *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* (IRRODL) now a highly ranked Canadian educational journal.

2003 – E-learning plan implementation positions Athabasca University as a fully online institution. Ontario eliminates Grade 13, visiting student cohorts expand dramatically. The number of active students grew from 26,715 in 2003 to 38,434 in 2008-09 before reaching a plateau of around 40,000 through most of the second decade of the century (twenty-teens) with the majority coming from outside the province of Alberta.

2005 – Athabasca University becomes first Canadian University to be accredited by one of the six regional accreditation associations in the United States (Middle States Commission on Higher Education). The

process offers a structure for ongoing quality assurance with an emphasis on student learning outcomes. The implementation of the Alberta Centennial Education Grants pushes increases differential fee structure for out-of-province students.

2006 – First Doctoral Program (EdD in Distance Education) opened. Moodle is adopted as the institutional learning platform. Faculties re-established and bicameral governance implemented. Increasing separation and specialization in academic, professional and support roles.

2007 – Alberta Roles and Mandates Framework expands degree granting institutions. Collaborative program offerings wind down.

2008 – Athabasca University Press starts Canada's First Open Access academic press. Emphasis on disciplinary research becomes an increased focus for continuing faculty.

2011 – Partnership with Royal Architectural Institute of Canada to deliver Canada's first online program for architectural education.

2013 – Financial Stringency declared. E-textbook initiative and restructuring follow.

2015 – Sustainability Taskforce under Interim President MacKinnon followed by Third Party Review (Coates Report in 2017). Implementation of semi-virtual organizational structure facilitates move of the executive positions out of the town of Athabasca. For-profit professional development/extension programming developed. Province of Alberta freezes tuition increases but provides increased operating grant. Unfortunately, at this point the provincial grant only provides one third of the institution's operating revenue.

2018 – Collaboration with Amazon Web Services announced. Information Technology functions positioned to be outsourced.

2020 – Move to Bright Space D2L (and away from Moodle) announced.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **Apart from being a distance education institution, what are the specificities of Athabasca University compared to traditional Canadian universities? And do you know how Athabasca University compares to other distance education institutions worldwide, for example the Open University in the UK, UNED in Spain or Université TÉLUQ in Quebec?**

NANCY PARKER: Athabasca University has always focused on serving adult learners and offers open admission to most undergraduate courses and programs. Its most unique feature is rolling admission dates for self-paced undergraduate courses whereby if a student applies before the 10th of the month they can start their coursework on the first of the following month.

After the transfer of BC's Open Learning Agency to Thompson Rivers University, it became the last unimodal distance delivery post-secondary institution serving English Canada. The institution has a full undergraduate Arts and Sciences curriculum and offers graduate programs in Arts, Business, Counselling, Education, Health Science, Information Systems, and Nursing. All programs and student services have been designed for distributed and flexible delivery with a high level of web-enabled self-service tools available all the time. Even though its continuing faculty contingent is relatively small (under 170), having academic staff developing curriculum and monitoring student achievement distinguishes Athabasca University from many of the private institutions or distance education operations nested in cost-recovery, extension departments.

Cooperation and collaboration with other post-secondary institutions have been critical to the success of Athabasca University. It was an active partner in Alberta North and eventually e-Campus Alberta until it was dissolved. Athabasca was also founding member of the Canadian Virtual University consortium. It also hosted some of the first University of the Artic courses.

Athabasca University has always explored the ways to better serve its learners by sharing practices with other Open Universities. Multiple visits and exchanges with the Open University in the United Kingdom (OUUK) included Athabasca University adapting some of the Open University's materials in its first few course offerings. When the OUUK first opened its short lived branch operations in the United States, it made use of Athabasca University materials to adapt to the North American curricular structure. The key difference between Athabasca University and many of the globally recognized Open Universities is scale, as Canada's Open University does not operate as a "Mega-University".

In the past Athabasca has partnered with University of Maryland University College (UMUC) and Tecnológico de Monterrey for joint seminars and with UniSIM (now SUSS) in Singapore for residential business programming. In terms of flexible learning models Athabasca University shares some common interests with NKI in Oslo, Norway, and the Competency Based Education (CBE) approaches in the United States at Western Governors University and at Empire State College in New York. Based on size and scope, Athabasca also has much common ground with institutions like the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) in Barcelona.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **To what extent would you say the development and creation of distance learning materials have been transformed and influenced by new technologies? How have technological advancements and distance teaching methodologies worked together over the years?**

NANCY PARKER: Distance Education has always been conditioned by available technologies. Athabasca University's innovation to the standard correspondence model was to implement audio-visual materials as well as telephone tutoring. For context it is helpful to remember that the first home video cassette recorders were released by Phillips on the same year that the Athabasca University pilot started.

Centralized production systems for the "course in a box" allowed the institution to achieve some economies of scale, but the highly articulated approach in course development (seven phases) proved to be too rigid for adaptation in a rapidly evolving online environment and a more responsive federated structure was eventually applied to digitized materials.

As social networking became more common place, constructivist or connectivist pedagogies came into fashion. Learning analytics provided additional ways to track student progress and apply automation for some support interventions.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **How would you describe a typical teaching job at Athabasca University? How has the teaching role evolved over the years?**

NANCY PARKER: From the very outset, Athabasca University has tried to de-centre teaching and emphasize learning. The course development systems separated subject expertise from instructional design and student support. At first, to distinguish itself from its campus-based counterparts, Athabasca University referred to its full-time academic staff as "Tutors" or "Senior Tutors" who reported to the "Heads" of interdisciplinary areas (Science, Humanities, and Social Sciences). Learner support was provided by

part-time, local course, or telephone, tutors. The term professor, as such, was not used as an official designation in university publications until 1986. Professors (Assistant, Associate, or Full) were presumed to have research as well as course development and team management duties. Course coordinators also maintained courses and supervised the student support provided by part-time tutors, but did not have research included in their regular workloads or assessment.

The implementation of call centres to respond to common student questions meant a further separation in instructional functions with general support, Markers and Academic Experts having different designations. The biggest difference for students was to have a pool of staff to contact instead of a single individual. For Tutors, the ongoing stipend for a block of students was stripped back so that Markers and Academic Experts work primarily on a piece-work basis – only being paid for verified contacts and/or assignment marking time.

Until recently the Tutor and Academic Expert workloads were capped to hold them at a part-time employment status, on the presumption that they held other instructional or professional positions. The advent of graduate programming with much more interactive, paced, learning environments brought shifts to academic workloads and the addition of more contingent visiting faculty and/or coaches.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **To what extent have your vision and your own methodologies changed throughout your career at Athabasca University?**

NANCY PARKER: Prior to coming to Athabasca University, I worked in an institution that primarily served the Adult Basic Education and training needs of isolated Indigenous communities. The commitment of Athabasca University to the removal of barriers that restrict access to and success in university-level studies was part of what first drew me to the institution and continued to inspire projects I was able to contribute to, including the Learning Communities Initiative and the Learning-to-Learn Online MOOC. Over time I have become more impressed by the resilience of our adult learners and the impacts they have in their home communities.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **Open and flexible learning relies on learners' motivation and self-regulation. What would you advise teachers and students who are having to switch to remote education in the context of the pandemic?**

NANCY PARKER: In Higher Education Research, a focus on the modality of distance and online learning often implies significant exceptionalism. With the wide scale deployment of online courses during the pandemic it is more apparent that there is not much that is extraordinary about ODL except how difficult it is to do well. The number of students who are protesting paying the same fees for what they perceive to be an inferior experience is a reminder that effective and engaging learning experiences do not just roll out with whatever LMS and/or conferencing system is used.

Something similar might be said for campus-based experiences since building classrooms and hiring graduate students and adjuncts does nothing to guarantee a quality learning environment. Familiar traditions and the captive audience created by the price of entry have cushioned campus-based undergraduate instruction from some of the scrutiny it is due, but a glance at standard graduation rates makes it clear that it does not work for roughly one third of the students admitted. Putting the same experience onto a computer screen is not a recipe for success.

It is important to understand that being a successful online learner (or teacher) is not automatic, but focusing on expected outcomes can be helpful for managing the workloads for both students and faculty since it can make efforts more intentional. It is vital for individuals to create learning communities that will help support them through the challenges of working in a potentially alienating environment. Finding individuals interested in their progress as student, who can listen and challenge ideas in a safe space, can make a very real difference. Instructors in the online environment need to find ways to be present and to empower students to build community that reaches outside of the boundaries of the physical or virtual campus.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **Generally speaking, how would you describe your career at Athabasca University, what were your main achievements and what are the main changes at Athabasca University that have affected you positively or negatively?**

NANCY PARKER: The Office of Institutional Studies was first established at Athabasca University to help support research-informed practices across the institution. I was fortunate to lead a team of talented researchers who worked with faculty and management to explore important questions and for many years it felt like we were very much part of a multi-disciplinary distance education laboratory. Department initiatives ranged from informing the student recruitment and retention practices with a full range of marketing and student life-cycle studies, to undertaking costing analysis for different delivery models, managing benchmarking surveys, and contributing to software development for learning analytics. Regularly communicating with leading ODL researchers was inspiring as it challenged the team to make the most of their access to rich institutional data sources.

My role as the Accreditation Liaison for the Middle States Commission on Higher Education drew me into Quality Assurance, and I was fortunate to work with international colleagues critically examining the mechanisms for assessing and communicating the quality of online education. Participating in international workshops and having my work appear in different languages was particularly satisfying.

HÉLÈNE PULKER & CATHIA PAPI: **How do you see the role of Athabasca University in the light of an increase in distance and online learning? What is the raison d'être of Athabasca University in the current context? In other words, how do you see the future of the university?**

NANCY PARKER: It is hard to stay optimistic even though planning initiatives seek to position the institution to serve many more learners than are currently enrolled.

In recent years, Athabasca University has positioned itself more closely with its delivery modality and less with its northern community base and open access mandate. Collaborative offerings have steadily eroded as programs that were once offered in partnership with other agencies are offered independently and/or various community colleges make the transition to degree granting, and ultimately university status. Rural and Northern communities are also a shrinking minority with less political weight, now that the economy tied to resource extraction has largely collapsed. The economic diversification that locating Athabasca University in a small northern town was supposed to create did not develop. As more positions are being moved out of the region, and even out of the province, there is less public support for the current administration and their political masters.

For more than a decade the institution has struggled to maintain a sustainable technological infrastructure and has retreated from staff-led innovations to rely almost exclusively on vendor solutions available to any institution. This means that apart from the large inventory of self-paced undergraduate courses there is less to distinguish the institution from place-based or bi-modal institutions.

The large proportion of single course takers at Athabasca University means that onboarding needs to be frictionless and cost effective. Integrating with provincial application portals can create barriers and there are demographic limits to the demand for service courses. Policy shifts outside the control of the institution can also have a dramatic impact on core revenue streams. In looking for additional market opportunities it has become clear that international students still seek the legitimacy of "in country" immersive experiences so trans-border delivery has not become a viable niche.

Providing an alternate route for adult learners, with options for credit consolidation and validation of prior learning could serve unmet needs aligned with the early conceptions of Athabasca University but there are significant challenges to offering prior learning assessments at scale without being labelled a "diploma mill".

These are significant challenges for the institution and finding a way to meaningfully recommit to improving the equality in educational opportunities for adult learners may provide an avenue for the institution to continue.