

Guiding Framework Responses - External Reviewer Report

Athabasca University Centre for Architecture

Dr. Brian R. Sinclair, Dr. Eric Lum, Ms. Kathleen Kurtin

FINAL March 31 2020

1

PREAMBLE

It has been a pleasure and honor for the External Review Team to visit Edmonton on March 12-13 2020 to learn about and critically assess the two programs under evaluation within Athabasca University's RAIC Centre for Architecture. The Review Team was impressed with the comprehensive and thoughtful preparations for and execution of said program reviews, including the self-study document as well as the conduct of many on-site meetings.

In the weeks leading up to the site visit, as well as during the two very intensive days of that visit, we found Athabasca administrators, faculty, staff and students to be accommodating, cooperative and professional. In any academic review the amount of data to be consumed, and understood, tends to be voluminous. Given that the two AU architecture programs in question are encountering their inaugural reviews, the review team was especially appreciative of the extraordinary efforts extended by AU representatives to ensure currency of information, to realize prompt responses to questions, and to collaborate as new ground was being examined and explored. Overall the review team had a very successful site visit and built very positive impressions of the institution, the faculty and its new programs.

Per the instructions rendered to the review team, this report is structured primarily around the Guiding Framework developed for such academic program assessment. Over the period leading up to the site visit, during the site visit proper, and subsequent to said visit the review team has delineated questions, positions and recommendations in the spirit of the Guiding Framework. In our report, required to be brief in length as mandated by Athabasca University, the review team has aspired to present key observations, fundamental points (e.g., program strengths and weaknesses) as well rendering some recommendations and guidance around moving forward.

The follow are the external review teams responses to questions outlined in the Guiding Framework:

1. Does the program continue to meet national and international quality standards for degree programs, including Council's program assessment standards?

Yes, in the view of the external assessment team Athabasca University meets national and international quality standards for the BSc-Architecture (BScArch) and the Graduate Diploma in Architecture (GDA). Overall the university and the faculty are mindful of said standards and, from our vantage point, have been diligent, responsible and progressive in ensuring quality is upheld and advanced. AU's compliance with the Alberta Ministry of Advanced Education's standards for its certificate, diploma, and degree programs, as well as the University's accreditation through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) testifies to the University's commitment to academic standards, while the alignment of AU's course structure to the Canadian Architectural Certification Board, is designed to meet the standards set by the Canadian Architectural Certification Board (CACB) for non-accredited architectural programs.

There were several areas where the review team had some questions and potential concerns. In a short 2-day site visit it is difficult to determine all aspects of programmatic responses to published standards, especially where there might be deficiencies. To this end the review team highlights the following areas as worthy of additional study and potentially the enactment of policies to foster ongoing quality:

- We believe all incoming students within the Architecture programs should be required to participate in mandatory orientation sessions (at institutional and/or faculty levels).
- We encourage the institution and faculty to carefully monitor and ensure the currency of course content and course themes/subjects.
- We recommend that the institution and faculty carefully assess response times in general as pertains concerns, feedback and requirements of the learning community.
- We suggest that the institution and faculty be vigilant around plagiarism including explaining it to students, watching for it in courses and addressing it when violations are exposed.
- We suggest that a similar level of attention and support be extended to core and elective courses as is provided to the studio programs.

2. Does the program demonstrate an understanding of the needs of learners in the program (including the quality of the student experience and learning environment {including the face-to-face experience and virtual environment} and support system), and provide the appropriate academic breadth and depth of knowledge as outlined in the expectations for degree level standards in the Canadian Degree Qualifications Framework?

Yes, the external review team determined that the Centre for Architecture programs, and their associated faculty and staff, sensitively and appropriately understand the unique needs of learning in their online milieu. We believe that AU has fostered a learning environment that is respectful & robust and that holds the promise of heightened resiliency (that is, if bureaucracy can be streamlined and responsivity proactively increased). Clearly the institution and the faculty are pioneers in emerging technology-based forms of educational delivery. The review team was impressed with the concern and care extended to students, potential students and alumni within the domain of the Centre for Architecture.

There were several areas where the review team saw room for attention and improvement:

- Response rates to student questions and concerns could be shortened and improved.
- The process around course creation, adjustment and improvement seems unnecessarily complicated and burdensome.
- There appears to be a lack of structural ‘consistency’ across all courses. In other words, while the content and categories addressed within courses seems effective, there does not seem to be a standard and parallel structure between courses.

With regard to academic breadth and depth of knowledge, the review team found the Architecture programs to be fulsome and responsible. We were particularly impressed with the dedication and resolve of the full-time professors, and found their commitment to innovation and efficacy in learning to be very inspiring.

3. Does the program continue to offer similar learning outcomes and opportunities for vocational and educational advancement as those offered to graduates of similar programs at Canadian post-secondary institutions?

In consideration of the self-study report, as well as the intensive on-site interviews and conversations, the review team in general believes the AU Architecture programs offer similar learning outcomes and opportunities for advancement compared to graduates of peer post-secondary institutions in Canada. We note ‘in general’ as many students, but not all, appear to produce design work on par with the presently accredited schools of architecture in Canada and in the United States (with the caveat that our comments are in response to the relatively small number of assignments and projects shown, in part reflecting the small number of students in the program). The review team members all have extensive experience educating architecture students – in reviewing the output from various courses and studios there seemed to be some unevenness in quality, perhaps due to a number of factors (including a relatively low GPA threshold, diversity in student background + preparedness, available time for study, etc.). In many cases the quality of work was exceptionally high and competitive with ‘bricks + mortar’ schools of architecture. However, in some cases the work seemed under-developed and lacking in detail & resolution. This in part is an outcome of the open admissions policy of the University, which on the one hand allows students who would not otherwise qualify to gain admittance to an architectural program, while on the other hand permitting a weaker overall body of students. The architecture programs at Athabasca University are relatively young compared to many of the more established programs of architecture in North America, and as such are on a learning curve. The programs at Athabasca University are also not accredited, which places them at some disadvantage with regard to checks and balances on quality. We are aware that a trajectory considers accreditation for the AU architecture program(s) – to this end we strongly recommend that the AU Centre for Architecture closely and aggressively pursue higher quality student output. One tangential recommendation we have, concerning student experience, is to standardize technology recommendations/requirements for all incoming architecture students. By ensuring all students work with the same equipment, and especially around studio and design efforts, we believe the overall quality of deliverables could be leveled and heightened.

- 4. Does the institution have a sufficient number of appropriately qualified faculty who demonstrate evidence of scholarly activity as outlined in Council’s Standards on academic staff for baccalaureate programs, its Academic freedom and scholarship policy, and its protocol on Research and scholarship in Campus Alberta? Has the institution maintained a culture of scholarship commensurate with its status as a Canadian degree-granting institution?**

The review team feels that there are at present a sufficient number of appropriately qualified faculty who demonstrate preparedness, capability, productivity and potential to meet existing demands. We note and welcome the arrival of a fourth full-time professor in the immediate future. We also recognize the Centre for Architecture’s reliance on dedicated part-time instructors (so-called ‘academic experts’). We recommend changing this nomenclature to be more in keeping with the terms used at accredited architecture schools – such as sessional instructors, adjunct instructors or contract instructors. The use of these part-time instructors has been a fundamental feature of the online delivery of the program, contributing to its success and innovative character. While we suggest the current FT faculty cohort seems adequate for current program sizes and delivery, we do foresee a significant shortfall if the institution seriously aims to pursue the proposed CACB-accredited Master of Architecture program. Migration to a fully-accredited MArch would prove a game-changer, and as such demands serious attention, increased resources and a careful reconsideration of curriculum, policies and procedures.

The review team has some cautionary notes to highlight concerning faculty members:

- While we see evidence of academic freedom and scholarship in the current three FT faculty members, we have concerns about the limited voice and modest influence of so called ‘academic experts’. These part-time instructors may feel disengaged from contributing to the success or understanding their role within the program, as they have no formal input in the academic governance of the university. These vital members of the teaching cohort should have greater impact with regard to the teaching & learning directions, changes, innovations, etc. At present many such instructors appear to deliver pre-packaged ‘fixed’ content with minimal ability to shape, update, improvise or ‘personalize’ same. The review team accepts the management challenges around online delivery and the need for control of content – that said we consider the instructor’s role to have vital ‘value-add’ dimensions that seem to be denied in the current system.

With respect to a culture of research and scholarship, at an institutional level we believe Athabasca University is fostering and ensuring quality and quantity of output. We do believe that such success falls short on the student side – in this respect we recommend that research be more assertively introduced in courses and studio offerings. Students need to be taught about research in more concrete and definitive ways, and they need to be better prepared to undertake research in firms and

companies upon graduation. The profession of architecture, and the building industry, is rapidly shifting to embrace evidence-based design, to see the deployment of research as core practices, to push a green agenda around environmental responsibility, and to promote post-occupancy evaluation, to name but a few important advancements. Students must be duly aware and equipped to take leadership within such realms.

One sensitive point that must somehow be addressed in the near future is the strong link to the RAIC Syllabus program. While the review team understands the genesis of this connection, and grasps its historical value in fostering AU Architecture's development, we consider it less important if not counter-productive at the present juncture. As AU aims to pursue an accredited Master of Architecture program it will prove increasingly strategic to strengthen the Centre for Architecture's scholarship, research and autonomy. The syllabus relationship has introduced many challenges, at structural, curricular and political levels, many of which seem unsolvable. The review team recommends critically revisiting this relationship. If the institution is serious about mounting an accredited MArch program, it may be necessary to abandon or at least more fully contain the existing syllabus aspects as well as removing the RAIC name from the AU Centre for Architecture.

As a final note on this guiding framework item, the review team must commend the three full-time professors – namely Douglas MacLeod, Trevor Butler and Henry Tsang – for their tremendous talent, devotion and contributions that have ensured the success of the architecture programs under evaluation. The review team is especially praiseworthy of Dr. MacLeod, whose leadership, energy and hard work has propelled the Centre for Architecture, and its constituent programs, to a place where countless students have been helped, to a position where the centre is recognized internationally, and to a situation where the possibly of an accredited Master of Architecture program stands within reach. Faculty always prove the foundation of viable and meritorious academic programs – the faculty in the AU Centre for Architecture are no exception to this fact.

5. Does the institution have both the academic resources (e.g., supporting disciplines) and the infrastructure (e.g., classrooms, information resources, labs, offices, equipment, etc.) to sustain the program?

From the review team's perspective Athabasca University's Centre for Architecture is well-resourced in numerous areas directly supporting the delivery of programs and associated curricula, and most

notably concerning information technology as well as the design/production of courses. Information technology is undeniably a hallmark of the institution, and as such needs to be innovative, effective and exemplary. By such measures we believe AU is an international leader and pioneer. By extension the Centre for Architecture is also well positioned and, to date, has been pushing boundaries and modeling ingenuity. If the institution is serious about launching an accredited Master of Architecture program, the Centre for Architecture will need to be adequately resourced in order to move architectural education in new and exciting directions. Leveraging on AU's existing leadership and capacity, the Centre for Architecture could guide higher education in novel and meaningful directions concerning the online education of architects. This is indeed an exciting and unprecedented prospect within the landscape of Canada's post-secondaries.

Returning to the matter of resourcing of current programs, the review team was impressed with the skill and collaborative aspects of the curricular design and production enterprise. While we did have numerous questions and concerns about system nimbleness and responsiveness, we were impressed with the effectiveness of the design/production team in shaping and packaging courses within the architecture programs. We will underscore again that we grasp the need for control and delivery of content, on legal, copyright and other grounds – yet we do believe more freedom must be granted for professors and instructors to shape the learning experiences in ways that transcends pre-packaged courseware. Another important observation of the review team is that while IT and design/production teams seem well resourced, the academic side of the equation warrants more support than presently is proffered. We encourage AU senior administration to critically assess current support of the academic domain and to increase funding therein to permit the team to adequately prepare for and realize an online accredited MArch degree program. If research becomes an integral aspect of a future graduate program, then some thought needs to be given towards how resources can be supported within a networked environment. For instance, consider how collaborative work could be enacted and new modes of teaching can be supported with a digital infrastructure.

6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What recommendations, if any, should be made to improve the program? What untapped opportunities exist for the program, if any?

Overall the review team was impressed with many aspects of the two architecture programs under assessment. We had many opportunities, beyond our consumption of the self-study report and

associated documents, to interact meaningfully with administrators, faculty, instructors, staff, students and alumni. While in some instances the number of representatives in a given category – for example instructors and students – was too low for our comfort, we did find all of the individuals interviewed to be open, thoughtful and helpful. A part of the challenge of online delivery is the building of communities. We heard from some respondents about promising efforts to build a sense of community, and to create virtual places where folks have a better sense of belonging, where they can more openly exchange ideas, and where they can shape identity in more potent ways. The review team understands the courage required by all stakeholders to engage in online teaching and learning, especially in light of societal preconceptions, skepticism and lack of support. To this end the review team saw repeated cases where participants – leaders, faculty, staff, students and graduates alike – demonstrated open-mindedness, resolve and a willingness to navigate in uncharted waters. While we did identify many weaknesses and concerns, we also saw such points countered by a plethora of strengths and an impressive array of opportunities. We believe that Athabasca University is in the enviable position to show higher education new ways of teaching, learning, researching and experiencing to a world in the midst of change and uncertainty. We deem this position and posturing to be the institution’s, and the centre’s, most remarkable strength.

The following is a list of strengths and weaknesses of the Centre for Architecture’s two programs under unit review:

STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
Flexibility concerning student time, physical location and management of studies	Flexibility concerning student time, physical location and management of studies
Broad spectrum of courses available	Lack of a common course structure
Accessibility	Bureaucratically heavy
Passionate & talented faculty	Placelessness and weak sense of community
Extended reach, geographically & demographically	Limited visibility + presence (e.g., in the professional and academic realms)
Consistency	Currency
Momentum	Lack of recruitment (strategically and otherwise)
Innovation & rethinking education	Societal skepticism

Youthfulness of programs	Power of the status quo
Unconventional means and methods	Small faculty cohort
Inspired Leadership	Very low completion/graduation rates
High number of course starts	Isolation of students
Lower Minimum GPA increases inclusiveness	Lower Minimum GPA lowers academic bar
Open Enrollment	Retention of students
Promotes student independence and character	Lack of sense of community and studio culture
Proven Learning Management System (Moodle)	Conventional learning management systems may be constrained for architectural design studio teaching
Potential for global reach with international student body and faculty	Consider how to incorporate the unique aspects of Athabasca University’s northern Canadian location to its teaching curriculum

The review team believes that improvements can be realized by thoughtfully and critically addressing the weaknesses noted above. One complication in determining paths to improvement is that in a few cases a strength is also a weakness – flexibility for example provides great room to maneuver yet it also introduces great uncertainty & indeterminacy. Given Athabasca University has over 50 years of experience pioneering in the ethos of distance education, we believe the institution, and its constituent faculties, department and programs, are exceptionally well positioned to respond to said weaknesses in ways that will meet the challenges and set higher education on exciting new trajectories.

7. What is the nature of the administrative support for the program (e.g., academic counseling, academic leadership)?

The review team found that the administrative support at Athabasca University, for the Centre for Architecture programs under present assessment, is both rich and robust. We were impressed by the position of senior leadership concerning the success, value and potential of the online architecture programs presently in place, as well as with the prospect of a fully-accredited online Master of Architecture degree program. Among the many individuals we engaged with during the 2-day site visit, all were positive, assuring and committed concerning the Centre for Architecture’s accomplishments and aspirations. The review team found the production systems, the information technology systems, and the student support systems to be well-organized and well-deployed. Senior

administration impressed us with their grasp of the challenges facing the Centre for Architecture as well as with their confidence in the ability of the Dean, faculty, instructors and staff to meet and overcome such challenges. It was apparent, through all our on-site interviews, that there is both vision and resolve concerning AU and the Centre for Architecture's potential to evolve in meaningful and important ways.

If we have a concerns on the administrative side they are twofold. The first concern pertains to the current budget situation in the province, and any negative impacts that might have on the Centre for Architecture's bold vision for an accredited degree in Architecture. To this end we urge AU to duly and appropriately resource the centre so that it might reach toward and realize its goals. The second concern pertains to an overly-heavy bureaucracy that seems, at times, to hamstring the centre in its push to be creative, innovative and effective. To this end we encourage AU to critically consider ways to decrease red tape and streamline processes while concurrently permitting academics to cultivate more potent, responsive and experiential teaching and learning environments.

SUMMARY

The review of academic programs is always a daunting and complex task, in part due to the exceptionally rich diversity of programs, pedagogies, people, policies and procedures at play. Considering online education elevates this complexity due to new methods, emerging technologies, upheaval of norms and challenging of conventions. Athabasca University has, for over half a century, been at the forefront of distance education. The Centre for Architecture, while less than a decade young, has likewise assumed a position of leadership and innovation. The AU architecture programs have been at times controversial, in no small part due to their arrival into a rather conservative milieu of accreditation that defines architectural education in Canada. The success of said programs, despite resistance and hesitation by the establishment, is praise-worthy. The review team, in assessing the BSc in Architecture, and Graduate Diploma in Architecture, found overall that the programs were meeting standards, pushing boundaries, advancing agendas and serving with success the needs of their extraordinarily diverse students. We feel the BSc in Architecture is strong and viable, and should continue to be supported and strengthened moving forward. However, we struggle with the place and value of the GDA, seeing it somewhat as a vestige of an agreement with the RAIC that may be no longer tenable. To this end we encourage AU and the Centre for Architecture to critically assess

this academic program and to question its worth and support looking ahead to a full accredited M.Arch. program.

While the review team has identified many areas in need of attention, evaluation and improvement, in general we found comfort in the progress of the programs and believe they have been developed and delivered with care and professionalism. We do have some concerns that need immediate attention, such as the relationship of the Centre for Architecture with the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada. While the review team holds the RAIC in high respect, we consider the existing relationship between the RAIC Syllabus and the AU academic programs to be arguably outdated and counterproductive. While there may be some roles for AU with regard to the syllabus program, we believe this must be judiciously re-considered and, moving forward, may need tighter containment and definition. For example, the fact that syllabus does not recognize online studio flies directly in the face of common sense and places the AU's mission in question with respect to efficacy & legitimacy.

No doubt the RAIC needs to critically consider the future of the syllabus program in light of a rapidly changing world – however, commentary beyond such illumination resides outside the scope of the review team's charge. Focusing more closely on the Centre for Architecture's programs, the delivery of online education is paramount and should not be compromised. In fact, while the existing BSc in Architecture and Graduate Diploma in Architecture are up to standards and are delivering quality education to their many students, we find the most exciting and substantive direction to be the possibility of an online accredited Master of Architecture degree program. While not without controversy over recent years, the review team finds the idea of this new model for accredited professional education in architecture extremely stimulating and believe the timing is good for its development and delivery.

The AU Centre for Architecture, under the capable leadership of Dr. Douglas MacLeod, has travelled a long distance in a relatively short period of time. Athabasca University has never shied away from uncharted ground, and with respect to its architecture programs, is to be commended for bringing online education to countless students who would otherwise be locked out of their dreams to pursue advanced learning. Overall we find that the academic milieu cultivated in the Centre for Architecture to be impressive in both character and in quality. While we have highlighted many areas that warrant attention, remediation and enhancement, overall we consider accomplishments to date to be notable

and aspirations moving forward to be laudable. Despite the present budget environment in the province we encourage AU's senior leadership to continue to resource and support the Centre for Architecture. We highlight the value of the BSc in Architecture and question the sustainability of the Graduate Diploma in Architecture. While beyond the mandate of the review of the two aforesaid academic programs, we are most enthralled with the prospect of a new accredited Master of Architecture program and urge all parties to rally behind this tactical and meaningful direction.

The external review team wishes to thank all of the many Athabasca University members who worked so tirelessly to prepare for and host our visit to Edmonton. The challenges of mounting such a review are always many. The fact the visit transpired while the COVID-19 emergency was gaining momentum made hosting our review even more challenging. As a final note, higher education's rapid and rushed migration to online learning in a COVID-19 reality underscored to the external review team the exceptional knowledge held by Athabasca University, as well as its ideal placement to show society how pedagogy can be delivered with efficiency and effectiveness in a digital world. Ironically, given the circumstances of the current COVID-19 crisis within which our review occurred and the fact that all schools of architecture in North America have had to become online schools as well virtually overnight, this situation has highlighted the reality that teaching architecture online is not only possible, but may well prove a necessity in the future.