

Response to the Aurora College Foundational Review

Town of Fort Smith
August 2018



INTRODUCTION

The following response addresses the Town of Fort Smith’s concerns regarding the recently released *Aurora College Foundational Review* (the “Review”) by the Department of Education Culture and Employment (ECE). The purpose of the review was to evaluate and make recommendations to the Government of the Northwest Territories (GNWT) on the operations, governance, and programming of Aurora College.

The Review’s overarching recommendation is to establish Aurora College (the College) as a Northern Canada Polytechnic University (NCPU). This recommendation includes establishing the main campus in Yellowknife and transferring leadership and senior management of NWT post-secondary education from Fort Smith to Yellowknife. The Town of Fort Smith (the Town) is deeply concerned with many of the findings of this report. It is the position of the Town that:

- the recommendations have been made in the absence of a vision for post-secondary education in the NWT;
- the recommendations lack understanding and attention to the real problems of education in the north and ignore the realities of our crisis situation; and
- the recommendations have been made with no consideration of the unique needs of NWT students coming from rural and remote communities.



Further, the Town has the following concerns with the Review:

Research Methodology

1. The Review recommendations are based on flawed research including a lack of consultation and lack of rigour in the methodology employed.

Decentralized vs. Centralized Service Delivery Model

2. The Review promotes the centralization of post-secondary education services to Yellowknife even though the ECE mission and values do not reference changes or plans for post-secondary education in the NWT.

Trends in Post-Secondary Education

3. The Review does not address current trends in education and technology which support the decentralization of post-secondary education.

Lack of Knowledge about Aurora College

4. The Review does not recognise that Aurora College already offers programs that are within the scope of a polytechnic university.
5. The Review does not address the budgetary challenges faced by Aurora College.
6. The Review does not acknowledge that ECE mandated the College to not undertake strategic planning and other activities.
7. The Review makes assumptions about the governance and operations of Aurora College that are untrue. Further, the Review does not acknowledge that many of the recommendations were previously identified and are currently being addressed.
8. The Review unjustly attacks the quality of the student experience in Fort Smith.

Direct and Indirect Impacts

9. The Review does not recognize or even consider the financial, cultural, economic, and social impacts to Fort Smith, Inuvik, and the many communities with learning centres of diverting academic resources and NWT post-secondary leadership to Yellowknife. This lack of consideration is apparent in the absence of any recognition or discussion of the 23 learning centres in the Review.

Costs

10. The Review does not contain a cost-benefit analysis for establishing a polytechnic university and moving the main campus to Yellowknife. This omission is a fiscally irresponsible action on the part of the Review writers and the Government of the Northwest Territories in the current and projected economic climate.



RESPONSE TO REVIEW

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Review recommendations are based on flawed research including a lack of consultation and lack of rigour in the methodology employed.

The Town is concerned about the lack of research into post-secondary education trends and recommendations that are based on a statistically insignificant sample of students. This lack of information has led to unsubstantiated generalizations about the College and its students.

In the absence of a literature review on trends in post-secondary education, the Review makes sweeping recommendations that will affect the very core of what Aurora College offers to communities throughout the Northwest Territories. At a most basic level, a literature review provides direction to research and a foundation for assessing current trends and opportunities. A careful and thorough literature review is essential when writing about research at any level. It identifies trends and can provide a context for a research study. However, the Review's authors "did not validate the information supplied to us beyond understanding its content...MNP has not independently verified any of the information provided to it and makes no representations as to the veracity or authenticity of the information." (Review pg. 17).

This approach is especially problematic given that the authors are not educators, nor do they seem to have a background in post-secondary education. The MNP website describes their services as a "comprehensive suite of professional advisory services (that) helps business grow and prosper". Post-secondary education is not listed as one of their service areas. Given this lack of educational expertise, one would expect that a thorough literature review would be undertaken to substantiate such fundamental changes to the Aurora College structure and program delivery.

Further to this lack of a literature review, the administration of the survey was flawed, resulting in meager response rates. As part of the review, seven (7) separate surveys were distributed between mid-December 2017 to mid-January 2018. The Review does not include copies of the surveys, so it is unclear what questions were asked. This lack of transparency in the research is also problematic and may indicate a bias in the

research questions. The individual surveys and their response rates are presented in the following table:

| Survey Type | # of Surveys Distributed | # of Responses | Response Rate |
|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------|---------------|
| Website Survey* | NA | 278 | NA |
| Employers | 295 | 25 | 8.5% |
| Apprentices | 180 | 14 | 7.8% |
| Partners | 44 | 17 | 39% |
| Past Board Members | 8 | 3 | 37.5% |
| Students** | 1421 | 15 | 1% |
| Ari Researchers | 18 | 9 | 50% |

Compiled from Foundations Review, Appendix D – pages 120 to 126

At no point in the Review is there any acknowledgement of the poor return rates and how caution should be used in reviewing the results. Instead, the results have been used as fact throughout the Review. It is important to note that only 15 students responded to the survey which was administered during the Christmas break.

Throughout the document, broad generalizations and recommendations are made with no foundation to the argument and no linkages to the research (as limited as it is). There is no evidence that any of the survey, workshop or interview participants support any of the recommendations including the educational model and location the authors are proposing.

Additionally, the Review tends to generalize about specific aspects of the College and its students without any validation. For example, on page 45, the authors claim that one of the reasons that part-time student numbers are higher in Inuvik and Fort Smith than Yellowknife is “that enrolling in any course will ensure continued financial assistance from ECE. As a result, students may move from course to course and continue receiving financial aid for many years”. There is no evidence presented to support this statement.

It is unimaginable to the Town that recommendations for such extensive changes to an educational institution and the impact on the communities it serves would be based on such meagre evidence.

DECENTRALIZED VS CENTRALISED SERVICE DELIVERY MODEL

The Review promotes the centralization of post-secondary education services to Yellowknife even though the ECE mission and values do not reference changes or plans for post-secondary education in the NWT.

The main recommendation from this Review is the centralization of post-secondary education services and governance in Yellowknife. This direction is not in-line with northern expectations nor does it represent current trends in the delivery of post-secondary education. It does not present a solid plan for the Inuvik and Thebacha campuses nor the 23 Community Learning Centres.

The decentralized model of education has been supporting northern learners since 1958 in the Northwest Territories. The community learning centres are in the 5 regions of the NWT. They are an integral part of Aurora College as they are often the first contact that many students have with the College in preparation for enrolling in a full-time program at one of the campuses. The learning centres deliver high school upgrading, general interest and employment-related programs and courses. The Review is unclear as to the fate of these valuable educational assets.



TRENDS IN POST SECONDARY EDUCATION

The Review does not address current trends in education and technology that support the decentralization of post-secondary education.

In recent years, education has experienced increases in hybrid methods of learning that combine traditional face-to-face approach with tech-powered e-learning. This form of learning has a level of flexibility and accessibility from both the educator and the students' perspective that is unavailable in a traditional classroom¹.

In Australia, for example, the Country Education Partnership has provided blended learning approaches in indigenous, rural and remote communities for many years. They are often required due to the challenges these communities face in delivering specialist curriculum and breadth of subjects. "Blended and virtual learning approaches not only present a contemporary learning approach but have proven to be an effective tool for rural students in addressing their geographic isolation from peers, venues, and services".²

A recent study in the United States highlighted that twice as many students there take online classes as physically attend class on campus.³ These findings are mirrored in the experience of Canadian post-secondary institutions. The move to online learning also reflects increased diversity in the typical student which now includes older learners and those seeking a mid-career change. Employers are looking for employees who have credentials and who can demonstrate and apply their learning through portfolios and work experience.

Aurora College is ideally placed to meet the opportunities presented by these exciting changes in post-secondary education. The College with its 23 community learning centres within each of the 5 regions (Beaufort Delta, Sahtu, Dehcho, North Slave, and South Slave) is poised to facilitate blended learning and virtual learning in remote communities throughout the NWT. This decentralized method is the approach that

¹ <https://elearningindustry.com/5-blended-learning-trends-that-define-higher-education>
<https://cep.org.au/what-we-do/rural-learning-support/>

² As above.

³ Ontario's Distance Education & Training Network, The Future of Higher Education and Learning: A Canadian View, July 2016

Aurora College needs to and plans to pursue. This approach is uniquely positioned to promote access to education in remote communities throughout the NWT and thereby students to pursue their educational and employment goals. It is essential that this approach is part of the vision for education within the NWT.

It appears that some Indigenous Governments were interviewed during this process; however, there is nothing that reports on the outcomes and key findings of these interviews. For example, there is no clarity on whether or not they support the centralization of services in Yellowknife.

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AURORA COLLEGE

The Review does not recognise that Aurora College already offers programs that are within the scope of a polytechnic university.

The Review recommends the creation of a polytechnic university in Yellowknife. However, it fails to recognize that the current range of educational offerings at Aurora College falls within the definition of a polytechnic.

According to Polytechnics Canada, “a Canadian polytechnic is a publicly-funded college or institute of technology that offers a wide range of advanced education credentials - four-year bachelor’s degrees, advanced diplomas, certificates, as well as in-class training for apprenticeship programs. Polytechnic programs are skills-intensive and technology-based. Hands-on, experiential learning opportunities are integral to the curriculum, providing students with practical training for jobs in demand.”⁴

Aurora College offers a range of programs including certificates, diplomas, degrees, trades as well as academic upgrading/access programs. Given that the programs and facilities are already well established on its existing campuses and learning centres, it is in the best interest from both a financial and a programmatic perspective to upgrade the current assets and programs to obtain official polytechnic status.

⁴ <http://www.polytechnicscanada.ca/polytechnic-advantage/what-polytechnic>

The Review does not address the budgetary challenges faced by Aurora College.

The College faces a myriad of challenges related to budgets which were overlooked as part of the Review. These challenges have affected the College in many ways including the vital ability to upgrade existing college facilities.

Some of the challenges include:

- The College base budget has not been increased since 1999, aside from forced growth tied to collective agreement salary increases.
- Over time ECE has asked the College to deliver programming through existing funding. While not technically a budget cut, these requests became a form of cut.
- Recently the College's operating budget was cut by \$3 million to remove the Teacher Education and Social Work programs, while concurrently posting a \$2.2 million operating surplus in 2016-2017⁵.
- There has been discussion lately about the new President's role in fundraising. The President's Office has repeatedly reached out over the years to various mining companies about legacy funding. While the mines have been most generous with equipment, materials, and partnering to leverage federal funds, they did not demonstrate an interest in donating to a publicly funded college.
- It should be noted that Aurora College acquires third-party project funding from the Governments of the NWT and Canada and ASETS groups.

The Review does not acknowledge that ECE mandated the College to not undertake strategic planning and other activities.

The Review criticizes the College for not having a Strategic Plan

- The Review fails to mention that ECE directed the College to stop work on its strategic plan twice; the first time in 2016 was to allow for completion of the Skills 4 Success plan and the second in 2017 was to allow for the completion of the Foundational Review. During that time the Board approved an interim plan prepared by the President.

⁵http://www.auroracollege.nt.ca/live/documents/content/Annual_Report.pdf

The Review makes assumptions about the governance and operations of Aurora College that are untrue. Further, the Review does not acknowledge that many of the recommendations were previously identified and are currently being addressed.

Governance

The review indicates that the Board of Governors was ineffective while not clearly stating the reasons and evidence for this conclusion. The Review further dismisses the concept of regional representation on the Board. In fact, most of what is recommended in this section are already in place:

- Board members were selected according to their skills and experience and received an orientation to the board and the College. Frequently, new members did not obtain approval from ECE in time for their inaugural meeting.
- The Town agrees with GB-7: Review and update the Act and make changes required to move towards reinstatement of the Board.
- Expand the role of the Board with respect to appointing and supervising the President and driving fundraising and philanthropy
- Limit the direction that the Minister imposes on the Board to allow it to provide oversight of the College

Maintaining regional representation on the Board is vital. Moving forward, the Town proposes that the College's independence is increased from ECE to bring it more in line with post-secondary institutions in the rest of Canada. Clarity in governance and reporting will be critical as the College continues to grow to meet the needs of current and future students.

Needs Assessments

The review makes three recommendations around the immediate implementation of needs assessments by College staff.

- The Regional Training Groups whose members include ASETS Group representatives, ECE staff, College staff, and industry meet regularly to identify labour market needs and emerging employment and training possibilities.
- This collaborative process has been highly successful over the decades. There have been easily 25-50 College/ASETS programs every year. A few examples include Early Childhood Diploma (Inuvik); Licensed Practical Nurse (Inuvik); Forestry Training (South Slave); Traditional Foods Preparation

- (Inuvik and Sahtu); numerous Heavy Equipment Operator courses (South Slave). (Regional Training Updates to Board of Governors at every meeting)
- The Regional Training Groups have proven themselves highly effective over the decades.

Regular Policy Reviews

The Review recommends developing and implementing a regular policy review schedule; enhancing the policy development framework to include details on when and how often policies are subject to review and developing terms of reference for the Policy Working Committee. (See recommendations O-1; O-2; and O-3)

- The College already has a Terms of Reference for the Policy Working Committee, as well as a Policy Development Schedule and a Framework for Policy Assessment, which forms the basis of the schedule.
- The Framework has five assessment criteria. Each policy was assessed after ECE directed the College to use bylaws rather than policies for matters dealing with student conduct, academic standards, and student loss of privileges.
- Each policy was assessed again following the reorganization of the College to determine priority for review.
- Included in the review are recommendations which have been in place for years. For example, there were two recommendations to create a social experience for students (APM-6; RR-7) another three to update policies (O-1; O-2; O-3); another one to implement a new Student Information System (O-11); three to develop program development and review frameworks (APM-1; APM-2; APM-5) and three to carry out needs assessments (APM-15; APM-16; APM-17).

The Review unjustly attacks the quality of the student experience in Fort Smith.

The Review failed to utilize existing data collected through course exit surveys. Instead, using the questionable research process, the Review concluded programs should be moved to Yellowknife because Fort Smith was not an appropriate place and did not provide: a social or recreational experience for students; opportunities for practicum placements; or opportunities for part-time work. This failure reflects the lack of due diligence by the authors of the Review. Fort Smith offers a broad array of activities to college students.

The Fort Smith community as a whole supports students through discounts at local businesses and free access to the Recreation Centre which is within walking distance of the student residences. It has a pool, fitness centre, gym, movie theatre, squash courts, a curling rink and offers a range of programs and services.

The College itself offers organized activities such as the "Walk to Tuk," a September welcome BBQ, Christmas toy drives, Thanksgiving Feasts, and Aurora College week events.

Finding practicum placements in Fort Smith has never been an issue. However, some students seek placements in their home communities. It is therefore unclear to us how the review can credibly state that there are no opportunities for practicum placements in Fort Smith.

Another allegation in the Foundational Review was that there are no part-time job opportunities available to Aurora College students in Fort Smith, which contributed to declining enrolment rates at Thebacha Campus. A review of employers in Fort Smith reveals that almost no students have sought part-time employment in Fort Smith, with one primary exception being the Town of Fort Smith itself that regularly employs Aurora College students part-time at the Town's recreation facilities.

In many cases, the Thebacha campus is seen as a stepping stone for post-secondary education. Students come from remote communities, and the Town provides a welcoming and safe environment for students from across the NWT.

In the words of Marnie Villeneuve, a graduate of Aurora College:

The review that was released May 2018 was a grossly inaccurate misrepresentation of Fort Smith. The examples cited such as “lacking extracurricular activities” were ludicrous. Our schools alone offer so many programs that students – especially teenagers – are busy nightly if they desire. Our recreation facilities are exceptional, the pool, after school programs, arena activities, Nordic centre, are well maintained and well run. Most of all, our activities are affordable, and community members are able to experience many activities and events. Our housing is affordable, our groceries are reasonably-priced – comparable to the south - and readily available all year round. People are eager to lend a hand and are very generous; this is very evident in all the exceptional fundraising the community engages in for the schools’ activities, churches, adult and kids’ sports.

Fort Smith allows AC students to move in and become a part of the community. People are embraced and are able to build meaningful relationships – whether it be with the new friends they make, the grocer or the postmaster. In Fort Smith, AC students and their families are engaged and made to feel like they belong. They are also encouraged to work there after graduation and make their home in Fort Smith. AC students become part of the rhythm of the community very quickly and know that they matter.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACTS

The Review does not recognize or even consider the financial, cultural, economic, and social impacts to Fort Smith, Inuvik, and the many communities with learning centres of diverting academic resources and NWT post-secondary leadership to Yellowknife. This omission is evident in the absence of any recognition or discussion of the 23 learning centres in the Review.

It would be remiss of the Town not to at least mention some of the potential social and economic impacts if the main campus were moved to Yellowknife. We estimate a loss of up to 78 staff positions including the Senior Leadership Team (10), related executive assistant and staff positions (36) and positions associated with the transfer of degree and diploma programs (26) if the GNWT follows the Review’s recommendations.

The loss of students at PWK High School and JBT Elementary schools (whose parents work or attend classes at Aurora College) would affect funding to the South Slave Divisional Educational Council (SSDE). Based on current information, it appears that there are typically 20 to 30 students at the schools with parents attending Aurora College. The schools receive funding of approximately \$16,000 per student so the loss of this many students would be significant both financially and educationally as it would result in the loss of teaching positions.

The Town's base population would experience a decline which would affect Federal and Territorial funding to the Town.

The future employment uncertainty created by the ECE's enthusiasm for the Foundational Review's recommendations has already been felt in the community with some families associated with part-time employment at the College suddenly deciding to sell their houses and leave town. As well, some local developers that were known to be considering building much-needed rental units have now told Town representatives they are now putting their plans on hold.

It is clear that moving the main Aurora College campus from Fort Smith to Yellowknife will have a detrimental effect on local businesses. Students and their families purchase goods and services locally. With an estimate of annual expenses of \$24,000 per student for groceries, transportation, entertainment, rent, and other services, moving the campus out of Fort Smith would result in a loss of \$7.2 million (based on 300 students) to local businesses and service providers. This cost is a very conservative estimate of what will be a significant impact.

The key to understanding the likely social and economic impacts on Fort Smith is that the Foundational Review proposes to move many of the diploma and degree-granting Aurora College programs to Yellowknife, taking with them full-time multi-year students and their families. The Review's vision for Thebacha Campus as a simply a "Centre of Trades Excellence" would result in a transient student population of mostly single males spending between 8-16 weeks at a time in Fort Smith in various technical, trades and apprenticeship programs. Thebacha Campus' considerable student family housing infrastructure would become vacant, save for students with families in upgrading programs. Beyond the economic impacts, such a transient student population would be

highly destructive on maintaining a dynamic social campus learning community at Thebacha Campus.

There are also other social and cultural impacts of the recommendations which do not appear to be considered in the review. The GNWT response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, states that “The GNWT commits to working actively to close the education gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students and supports the objectives of the recommendations by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission under this theme,” p.6. Disappointingly, the only discussion about post-secondary education in this document relates to funding. There is no acknowledgement that indigenous learners have unique learning needs and styles. Further, there is no acknowledgement about the difficulties indigenous learners can experience when leaving a small community and traveling to a city for post-secondary education. There is no evidence presented in the Review that demonstrates that centralizing post-secondary education in Yellowknife will close the education gap between indigenous and non-indigenous learners.

COSTS

The Review does not contain a cost-benefit analysis for establishing a polytechnic university and moving the main campus to Yellowknife. This omission is a fiscally irresponsible action on the part of the Review writers and the Government of the Northwest Territories in the current and projected economic climate.

The development of a new university campus is a massive and costly endeavour. The Review provides no acknowledgement of the challenge of such an undertaking, by completely disregarding the potential financial investment not only to develop the campus but also to create programming and attract top educators. As an example, the recently completed 130,000 square foot Langara College Science and Technology Building came in at \$44 Million. This same project in the NWT is estimated to cost \$115,000,000 for the building alone.

In 2017 the Taylor Architecture Group reviewed 10 buildings in Fort Smith for the Department of Infrastructure. This report indicated that the renovation and retrofit of the existing Aurora College facilities would be more cost effective than rebuilding the campus.

It is the opinion of the Town of Fort Smith that ECE invests in the existing campus facilities to address residence shortcomings identified in the review to ensure it meets today's requirements rather than endeavour to build an entirely new campus at some undetermined cost. It should be clearly noted that Aurora College's buildings in Fort Smith – GNWT assets – likely total in excess of \$200 million worth of public facilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The GNWT needs to develop of a shared vision for post-secondary education and conduct a proper needs assessment (including labour market statistics), condition assessment and capital plan for improvements to existing Aurora College facilities, including student housing. Based on these data-driven assessments, and a comparison to current post-secondary programs, identify new programming at both the diploma and degree level to meet the priorities identified in the needs assessment. Specifically:

| Recommendations | | Due |
|-----------------|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. | The GNWT should immediately undertake a broad-based consultative process to develop a clear and consensus-building vision for all Post-Secondary education in the Northwest Territories, recognizing the importance of strong regional centres and the reality of our consensus government. | 2018/2019 |
| 2. | Fort Smith should remain the Education Centre of the Northwest Territories, including the Office of President and other senior managers. | 2018 |
| 3. | Enable Aurora College to complete and implement its Strategic Plan to meet immediate Northwest Territories post-secondary training needs. | 2018 |
| 4. | Revise the Aurora College Act to remove the overriding control by the department of Education, Culture and Employment and to set the groundwork to grow the college into an arm's length organization and a true Northern Polytechnic University. | 2018/2019 |
| 5. | Create a comprehensive capital plan with meaningful GNWT support for current Aurora College facilities, and improve or replace inadequate Aurora College facilities such as Breynt Hall, Mount Aven and Yellowknife Campus. | 2018 |
| 6. | Design and implement a comprehensive study and appropriate action plan using consultants knowledgeable about post-secondary education. This work would draw on parents, teachers, DECs, the general public to understand why children's literacy and numeracy skills are low across the NWT but especially outside Yellowknife. It would also examine why children's attendance at school is low, and by extension, why not enough young people are college ready after grade 12. | Design 2018 Implement 2019/20 |
| 7. | Re-establish the Board of Governors with regional and sectoral representation in the development of the future of post-secondary education in the Northwest Territories. | 2018 |
| 8. | Explore partnership opportunities with existing universities that already have a Northern presence, such as Wilfrid Laurier and the University of Alberta, to determine whether these institutions could increase their presence and post-secondary opportunities in Yellowknife. These partnerships would benefit all NWT residents. | 2018/2019 |