



CITY OF YELLOWKNIFE
OFFICE OF THE MAYOR

September 25, 2020

Honourable R.J. Simpson
Minister Responsible for Education, Culture and Employment
P.O. Box 1320
Yellowknife, NT X1A 2L9

Dear Minister Simpson,

Re: Polytechnic University Areas of Teaching and Research Specialization Discussion Paper

Thank you for your September 1st letter inviting the City of Yellowknife to comment on the Polytechnic University Areas of Teaching and Research Specialization Discussion Paper. I am writing today to provide feedback on the discussion paper on behalf of the City of Yellowknife. The City's response was informed by input from members of the University/Post-Secondary Advisory Committee¹. The purpose of the UPAC is to provide advice and guidance to the City of Yellowknife throughout the development of a response to the [University Feasibility and Benefits Study](#) and inform the City's efforts to establish the presence of a university/post-secondary institution in Yellowknife. Although the City is encouraged by recent efforts to implement recommendations from the Aurora College Foundational Review, we would like to provide the following feedback:

(i) Areas of Specialization

Overall, the areas of specialization are too broad and do not focus on what a polytechnic university should, or could, offer here in the North.

For example, concerns were raised by the committee regarding the exclusion of the social sciences as an area of specialization. The public sector is a large employer in the North and such a program would provide Northerners with the critical thinking skills necessary for being successful in research and analysis. Social science degrees are popular with international and Canadian students and excluding this area of specialization could be a missed opportunity to expand the student population.

It is also concerning that while technology is a major industry driving our economy and development, it appears from the Discussion Paper that this proposed area of specialization is almost entirely limited to technology as it pertains to machinery and the trades. The skills for tomorrow involve a high-level understanding of more advanced technology like coding. Having no technology focus in a place where remote work can bring employment to remote places is a missed opportunity as even mining is moving towards remote and automated technology.

¹ University/Post-Secondary Advisory Committee Terms of Reference - https://www.yellowknife.ca/en/city-government/resources/Current_Committees_of_Council/University-Post-Secondary-Advisory-Committee/UNIVERSITY-POST-SECONDARY-ADVISORY-COMMITTEE-TERMS-OF-REFERENCE.pdf

(ii) Development of the Areas of Specialization

It appears that the development of the proposed areas of specialization and research was done without adequate consultation and input from experienced stakeholders and other education providers in the NWT about what programming is needed. The final product appears to underestimate, rather than celebrate, the academic strengths and opportunities of the Northwest Territories and its people. Overall, there is aspirational language in some of the positioning of the polytechnic university but this falls flat when it comes to the actual programming.

(iii) Student Attraction and Academic Wants

Attracting students from outside of the NWT and Canada is a way to maintain a large student body with a plethora of diversity and skills but the proposed areas of specialization do not describe competitive programming that will attract people to come study in the NWT rather than elsewhere. The City's feasibility study stressed that without attracting a large body of students from outside jurisdictions, a polytechnic university would not be feasible. Accordingly, the areas of specialization need to be marketable to a wider Canadian and international student base.

Universities must provide an educational product based on what the market requires. The City encourages the territorial government to perform a thorough analysis to determine what educational products are currently offered elsewhere, find the gaps and determine how we can fill those gaps and excel.

Conclusion

The areas of specialization as proposed are not markedly different than what is currently offered in the North. A true Aurora College 'transformation' will require new directions and ideas and the proposed approach is not ambitious. It is unclear whether the polytechnic university will truly be different from the existing Aurora College. The strongest model will be one which brings institutions together, building on existing strengths and using them to our advantage.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this critically important step in the Aurora College transformation. I hope the City's perspective helps push you towards the ambitious approach this Territory needs and deserves. On a final note, I would like to state that members of UPAC voiced their disappointment regarding the timeline for consultation. This short timeline was deemed insufficient to support meaningful consultation. Moving forward, the City submits that provision of a longer timeline to allow stakeholders to prepare comments on such an important and complex matter would be more appropriate.

Should you have any questions regarding the UPAC and its position on this discussion paper, please do not hesitate to contact me at my office at 867-920-5693 or by email at mayor@yellowknife.ca or to contact the Chair of the Committee, Councillor Julian Morse at 867-446-0276 or by email at jmorse@yellowknife.ca.

Sincerely,



Rebecca Alty
Mayor

DM#625824

