

The University of the Arctic

The dream of university-level education delivered in the North, specifically for Northerners and with a focus on northern issues, has been present in Canada for a number of years. Although a charter adopted for a University of the North never came to fruition, the northern colleges (Yukon College, Aurora College in the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut Arctic College) have continued to grow. Although these colleges focus primarily on vocational programs, they do offer some academic courses, particularly at Yukon College, and have developed accords or memoranda of agreement with some southern universities for credit transfer. The demographics and economies of the Canadian North make it difficult to envisage a university in the North offering a comprehensive range of programs.

Within the existing university system in Canada, few institutions offer comprehensive programs with a northern focus, although some offer specialization in one or more disciplines. By comparison, other circumpolar countries have major universities in the North with northern mandates (the University of Tromsø in Norway, the University of Lapland at Rovaniemi, Finland, and the University of Alaska campuses at Fairbanks and Anchorage) or major universities committed to Arctic research (for example, in Denmark and Sweden).

The demographics of the circumpolar region, with small, dispersed communities, a wide range of communication systems, and difficult access, have required students wishing to pursue college and university education to move either to the larger centres in the North or to mid-latitude institutions, where much of the curriculum is not northern in focus and there are strong cultural stresses.

The advent of the Arctic Council renewed interest in northern post-secondary education and particularly in university education on the international scene. In early 1997, following informal discussions, the Arctic Council asked the Circumpolar Universities Association (CUA) to appoint a task force to report on the concept of a circumpolar university. The Arctic Council accepted the report in late 1997 and charged the CUA with forming a working group to develop a feasibility study. The working group consisted of representatives of the eight circumpolar countries and the indigenous peoples of the Arctic. The feasibility study was subsequently approved by the Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council in Iqaluit in 1998, and the working group became the Interim Council of the University of the Arctic, independent of the CUA.

Canada is represented on the Interim Council by the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (I am the current President) and by Sally Ross, President of Yukon College, who represents the three northern colleges. The indigenous peoples' participants' the Sami Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, and the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North—endorsed the concept of the University, provided that the full participation of indigenous people was ensured. In a “Shared Voices” statement, they concluded as follows:

The University of the Arctic must involve indigenous peoples. It must not be like other educational institutions experienced by some of us as “systems of pain” that ignore or even repress our cultures and economies. Considerable energy and time must be devoted to recruiting indigenous people who will retain respect for and commitment to their indigenous societies and roots to join the University. We offer to the university community our experiences and approaches to the world and to life: for example, consensual as opposed to litigative methods of resolving conflicts and core values including respect for, rather than exploitation of, animals and nature. We hope these and other values of importance to us may be expressed in the charter that will breathe life into the University of the Arctic.

(<http://urova.fi/home/uarctic/pub/freport/shvoices.html>)

The principles of the University, evolved from the Interim Council, are embodied in its governance system:

- The University endeavours to realize the vision of “shared voices” in all its activities.
- The composition of Uarctic’s governing bodies reflects the cultural diversity of the circumpolar world.
- The University addresses issues relevant to northern peoples as they seek to realize the potential for cooperation in the circumpolar world and to meet the challenges of sustainability and globalization.
- A common goal of institutions and individuals participating in UArctic programmatic activities is to generate and transmit knowledge about the interactions of biophysical and human systems in the Arctic and the role of the Arctic in global systems.

(<http://urova.fi/home/uarctic/organization/governance.html>)

The concept of the University is one of a university without walls. Programs are intended to be delivered through a range of distance learning technologies, through formal classroom settings at a number of locations in the circumpolar world and elsewhere (depending on the nature of the program component), and at field locations around the Arctic. In many locations, technical capacity will have to be upgraded to allow distance learning to be available not only in community centres, but in individual homes. This capacity is essential to maintain the strength of the community in northern cultures. However, mobility will also be promoted for some components of the programs, to bring together Arctic students and Southern students.

Undergraduate and postgraduate programs are being planned. A curriculum for a Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies is in development, and participation from universities and colleges in the delivery of components of the program will be sought. In addition, a number of existing postgraduate programs and initiatives are becoming associated with the University.

One of the major challenges will be to develop information sources to support the curriculum. Since the focus of most extant texts is mid or low latitudes, it will be necessary to promote materials that emphasize the Arctic reality, which can readily be translated and produced in both hard copy and electronic formats.

The University is therefore moving ahead with its mandate to provide undergraduate and postgraduate training with a focus on Northern issues and delivered in the North. The University is seeking full participation of northern people for its governance and instructional staff, while continuing to promote the integration of expertise in existing institutions.

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