

# The University of the Arctic: From Vision to Reality

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, access to post-secondary education in the Circumpolar North remains a significant challenge, particularly outside the Nordic countries. Underscoring this challenge is the often-noted observation that Canada is the only circumpolar country that does not have a university in its own Arctic region. University education in the provincial Norths is uneven, with the exception of universities such as the University of Northern British Columbia in Prince George and Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario. Other countries such as Russia, the United States (Alaska), and Denmark (Greenland) face similar challenges. Yet, all studies indicate that community and individual well-being is strongly correlated with educational achievement.

One of the most ambitious attempts to address this challenge of creating access to university education in remote, northern communities is the University of the Arctic. Endorsed by the governments of the Arctic Council in 1998 and officially launched in Rovaniemi, Finland in 2001, the University of the Arctic (UArctic) has embarked on the dual tasks of building human capacity and fostering a regional identity in the Circumpolar North through international educational cooperation among universities, colleges, and Indigenous and non-governmental organizations. In June 2006, UArctic celebrated its fifth anniversary at its annual council meeting in Bodø, Norway.

As an idea, UArctic is bold and visionary. The idea that post-secondary institutions would create a common Circumpolar curriculum that would be taught cooperatively across the eight Arctic countries—over the Internet, in the classroom, and through student exchanges—and that Indigenous organizations would not only participate in the oversight but also in the design of curriculum to meet pressing needs of northern communities, seemed almost fantastic in the late 1990s. UArctic, however, has been a remarkable success. Although still very much a fledgling institution, there have already been more than 3,500 student enrolments in UArctic common courses, which are taught regularly in Russia, Canada, Alaska, Norway, Finland, and Iceland. Significantly, students have started to complete the degree programs offered

through the member institutions, with the first seventeen students graduating from Bodø University College, Norway, in June 2006, and a second cohort of 22 students graduating in 2007.

This paper outlines the origins of UArctic from idea and inception through its early days and launch, with observations on the politics of building circumpolar cooperation in Northern education. It then discusses the evolution of three key program areas that aimed to meet the new university's professed goals of building human capacity and regional identity in the Circumpolar North through international education, namely, the undergraduate Circumpolar Studies Program, the student mobility north2north Program, and the Arctic Learning Environment. The final section of the paper offers some observations on the challenges that lie ahead for the future development of UArctic.

### **From Idea to Inception: Building Political Support**

UArctic originated as an idea among a handful of academics who had worked for years in circumpolar educational cooperation. Sally Webber (Canada), Asgeir Brekke, (Norway), Oran Young (United States), Rasmus Rasmussen (Denmark), and Bill Heal (Great Britain), among others, played key roles in initiating the idea of a UArctic. However, to move from an idea to reality required two basic things: a plan and resources. In regards to the latter, UArctic could not realistically exist without government funding. Although foundations and the private sector could provide key investments, and universities and colleges could contribute teaching resources, the basic organization of UArctic would require base funding from government. This was especially true in the Nordic countries and Russia, where there is little culture of non-state funding for post-secondary education. Moreover, as an international endeavour, UArctic would require funding from national governments. This would require both domestic and international fundraising efforts, so it should come as no surprise that if UArctic were to succeed it would require the support of the eight states that comprise the Arctic Council: Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russian Federation, Sweden, and the United States.

Building support for UArctic through the Arctic Council has been a consistent theme in the history of UArctic. In fact, the initial idea was presented by Professor Bill Heal to the Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) of the Arctic Council at their meeting in Kautokeino, Norway, in 1997. The SAOs received the idea positively and invited Bill Heal to establish a task force to undertake an initial exploration of the Arctic university idea. The task force presented a preliminary development plan to the SAOs at their meeting in October 1997. Based on this plan, the Arctic Council requested that a feasibility study for a proposed University of the Arctic be undertaken by the Circumpolar Universities Association (CUA) in collaboration with the Arctic Council's

Permanent Participants.<sup>1</sup> The CUA established a working committee, which completed the feasibility study the following year.

However, the Arctic Council was not the only government forum from which the proponents of UArctic sought political support. Two other groups were pivotal: the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region and Indigenous political organizations. As early as April 1998, the CUA working group made a presentation to the Third Conference of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region. This presentation resulted in a statement of support from the Arctic Parliamentarians for the proposed University of the Arctic. In July of that year, the working group also made a presentation to the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC). This presentation led to ICC's Resolution 98-03, which voiced support for a proposed University of the Arctic. Another important expression of Indigenous support for the UArctic was the document *Shared Voices and a University of the Arctic—Views of Indigenous Peoples*, co-authored by the Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, and Sami Council.

By 1998, the CUA working group presented its *Feasibility Study Final Report* to the ministers of the Arctic Council and the ministers formally endorsed the proposal to establish the University of the Arctic.

### **Early Days: Plans and Resources**

Along with building political support for both the idea and the necessary resources, UArctic required a concrete plan. One of the first steps was to replace the Circumpolar Universities Association working group with the University of the Arctic Interim Council, which held its first meeting in Fairbanks, Alaska, in December 1998. Leadership is a sine qua non for the success of new organizations. They require visionary architects capable of drafting blueprints that can transform initial ideas into plans with concrete deliverables. Arguably, the two chief architects who laid the foundational blueprints, transforming UArctic from a germ of an idea into a visionary plan, were Aron Senkpiel (Yukon College) and Outi Snellman (University of Lapland).

In January 1999, the University of Lapland (Rovaniemi, Finland) agreed to host the UArctic Circumpolar Coordination Office (CCO) and the office was founded, with Outi Snellman as its coordinator and with financial support from the Finnish government. The creation of the coordination office was foundational for future development of UArctic. The coordination office was the backbone of the organization of interim council meetings, fundraising efforts through the member states of the Arctic Council, and promotion and communications of UArctic (such as the monthly newsletter, *Shared Voices*, and the drafting of the first proposals and policies of UArctic). Somebody

had to step up to the challenge first and for UArctic it was clearly the Finnish government and the University of Lapland.

By May 1999, UArctic held its second Interim Council meeting in Akureyri, Iceland, a meeting where all its members were able to sit around a table in a modest-size board room. As with many institutions in their very early days, goals and dreams preceded the acquisition of resources to make those dreams possible. But, it was a very liberating time in the history of UArctic. The very recent collapse of the Soviet Union and very recent creation of the Arctic Council meant that vibrant circumpolar cooperation in the field of post-secondary education was within grasp. This was manifested most significantly in the discussions of the draft proposal of a Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies degree, which would come to be known as the flagship program of UArctic.

Two key documents in the early stages of UArctic's development were the *Foundation Principles of the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies Program* and *An Integrated Plan for the Implementation of Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, Arctic Learning Environment, and the Circumpolar Mobility Program*. The *Foundation Principles* in many ways served as the foundation principles of all other UArctic programs. The principles focused on the central importance of accessibility to northerners, circumpolarity, interdisciplinarity, validation of Western and Indigenous knowledge in the curriculum, and the importance of building a sense of a shared region and a circumpolar community.

The second document, the *Integrated Plan*, sought to guide the coordinated development and implementation of the three core UArctic initiatives: the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, the Arctic Learning Environment, and the Circumpolar Mobility Program. As the document states, "Together, these three initiatives represent the minimum core capacity that warrants the creation of an Arctic post-secondary educational organization, particularly one called a university."

### **Circumpolar Studies Program**

The Circumpolar Studies Program (originally called the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies Program) is the flagship or signature program of the University of the Arctic. Recognizing the critical importance of building human capacity in northern communities through access to university education, one of the first goals of UArctic was to develop an undergraduate curriculum that was both accessible and relevant to northerners around the circumpolar world. As the *Integrated Plan* stated:

The Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies (BCS) is about providing new, regionally relevant education to the University's primary client group: northerners whose access to higher education and training is limited or non-existent because of where they live, the language they speak, or money they don't

have. Developed by leading educators from across the circumpolar region, this new innovative curriculum is based on the best of northern science and the knowledge traditions of northern peoples. The BCS is about helping them grapple with the region's complex problems and preparing them for professional employment in areas that will improve health, diversify the economy, increase security, and preserve culture. The BCS is also about moving northern content from the edge of the academy's curriculum to its centre. It is about the enfranchisement of a new group of learners and the validation of a new curriculum.

UArctic created the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies Program Development Team (PDT) in the spring of 1999 with the mandate of identifying the guiding values and pedagogical framework of an undergraduate program of study that would allow both for degree completion opportunities in remote, northern regions and for international learning opportunities—virtual and physical—for students from northern communities.

As founding co-chair, along with Jón Haukur Ingimundarson from the Stefansson Arctic Institute in Akureyri, Iceland, Aron Senkpiel's influence extends far over the Circumpolar Studies Program and UArctic as a whole. His dynamic, passionate, visionary leadership was pivotal for the development of the Circumpolar Studies Program from dream into reality. The first meeting of the Program Development Team was held in Akureyri, Iceland in May 1999. At that meeting, Aron Senkpiel presented the original draft of a Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies. The idea was both very simple and extremely innovative. In most remote regions across the Circumpolar North, students have access to the first two years of university education, either through a college or satellite university campus or through distance delivery. However, many remote regions do not have access to university degree completion opportunities. Moreover, the education that may be accessible is often not terribly relevant to northern students or the needs of their communities.

The degree's simplicity is in its structure consisting of three basic elements. The first element is the seven three-credit core courses; there is one introductory course and three pairs of courses at the senior level—land and environment, peoples and cultures, and contemporary issues. The second element is the advanced emphasis, a focused area built on specified senior level courses of no less than fifteen credit units (thirty European Credit Transfer System units) or the equivalent of a semester of study. Advanced emphases have been constructed in Aboriginal Public Administration, Arctic Engineering, and International Project Management, to name but a few. The last element is the degree requirements of the university from which the student plans to graduate. The first two basic elements provide the major in Circumpolar Studies and constitute thirty-six credit hours, typical for most majors in North America. Universities and colleges belonging to UArctic were encouraged to

include these courses in their course catalogues and to create Circumpolar Studies or Northern Studies degrees where appropriate.

The idea is that students in remote communities or in jurisdictions that do not have degree completion opportunities would take the first half of a degree through their respective regional colleges. The seven core courses would be taken on-line and an advanced emphasis would be completed either on-line or on-site through a student mobility program. By laddering from regional colleges to universities, students would be able to complete degrees in areas that are relevant to their lives and their communities, without having to leave the North.

To date, UArctic has exceeded best expectations. Although still early in development, about fourteen institutions teach one or more of the UArctic core courses in Alaska, Russia, Iceland, Norway, Finland, and Canada. The full Circumpolar Studies Program is available at Bodø University College in Norway, the University of Lapland in Finland, the University of Northern British Columbia, and the University of Saskatchewan. Other institutions are in the process of implementing new degree programs that are compliant with the UArctic Circumpolar Studies Program. Student enrolments in UArctic core courses already exceed 2,000 and the number is growing. The first seventeen students to complete the program graduated from Bodø University College in 2006 with a Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies. What is even more remarkable is that twelve of the students in the graduating class were from northern Russia and completed their studies through a combination of traditional courses at their home institutions in Russia and through on-line courses and on student exchange with Bodø University College. Another twenty-two students graduated in June 2007 and included a student from Iceland. About thirty students are on track to graduate in June 2008, including one from northern British Columbia, from the University of Northern British Columbia, and nine students from northern Saskatchewan through a jointly delivered program between Northlands College and the University of Saskatchewan.

Why has the UArctic Circumpolar Studies Program succeeded? Two reasons: content and delivery. The curriculum content was developed by northerners (80 percent of the authors are from the North) and by Aboriginal people (20 percent of the authors are Indigenous from all three major geographic areas: Scandinavia, Russia, and North America). This meant, with admitted flaws and omissions, that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Equally important is that the curriculum was developed as a truly circumpolar initiative, with circumpolar curriculum teams negotiating and agreeing on the shared content that would be taught across the Circumpolar North. This meant that there was international buy-in from the start and that the same curriculum was taught in Sakha State University (eastern Siberia) as

was taught in the University of Akureyri (northern Iceland) as was taught in Yukon College (northern Canada).

The process of curriculum development has implications for delivery. One outcome is that credit transfer has been relatively easy. Because the curriculum is essentially identical, institutions readily accept credit transfer among each other, across countries—which, ironically, is often more difficult to achieve within a single province in Canada. Another outcome is the development of a circumpolar teaching consortium. Many of the UArctic partners involved in the development of the curriculum felt a shared responsibility for its delivery, particularly to create access for students in remote, northern communities. However, UArctic has yet to receive incremental course delivery resources. As is often the case, necessity is the mother of invention. A teaching consortium was created to ensure on-line delivery of all seven core courses through a multilateral virtual exchange arrangement. Each institution in the consortium takes responsibility for providing the instructor of at least one of the core courses. However, students register as de facto exchange students and pay tuition fees to their home institution no matter which institution is offering the course. The course credit is then transferred back to the students' home institution. This has worked remarkably well for hundreds of students from Canada, Russia, Alaska, Norway, Greenland, Iceland, and Finland.

### **Mobility**

One of the most exciting contributions of UArctic is the mobility program. On a per capita basis, student mobility in the eight Arctic states occurs overwhelmingly among students from southern regions. In countries such as Canada where student mobility is much lower than in Europe, this pattern is even more pronounced. Moreover, students who participate in student mobility programs tend to come from families that are better off and that have a history of university education. The University of the Arctic's north2north (n2n) student mobility program breaks down those barriers for northern students.

As the name implies, the n2n program provides opportunities for students from northern communities to travel to other northern post-secondary institutions. The idea for the program is not new and builds on the previous experience of the North Consortium, a Canada-EU funded project that included the University of Northern British Columbia, Yukon College, the University of Lapland, and the University of Aberdeen. Since 2002, more than 200 students have participated in the n2n program; most of the outbound students from Canada are Aboriginal students from the Canadian provincial and territorial North. One of the most important caveats of the n2n program is that students are not allowed to travel in their own geographical region. Students in North

America must travel to Scandinavia or Russia; Russian students must travel to North America or Scandinavia; and so on. This provides students the opportunity to move outside of their cultural comfort zones and experience the North through often fundamentally different cultural and historical lenses.

The mobility program has encountered numerous challenges—all of which have been overcome. These challenges included structure, jurisdiction, and funding. First, most universities, especially in North America, are used to bilateral exchange programs. The idea of a multilateral program was difficult for a number of Canadian institutions to wrap their heads around, but the idea has worked in practice allaying the fears that it might prove unworkable, especially around issues of reciprocity and formalized institution-to-institution agreements. Interestingly, a number of bilateral agreements have emerged between universities and colleges as they begin to recognize areas of mutual teaching and research interests. Second, jurisdiction has proven to be a challenge in Canada. The Nordic countries are all unitary states, so all spheres of jurisdiction ultimately rest with the national government. This is not true in Canada, where areas such as education ultimately fall within provincial responsibility, notwithstanding cooperation between federal and provincial governments in areas outside each of their respective areas of jurisdiction. The national governments in the Nordic countries had no national counterparts to work out student exchange arrangements, so a Canadian Circumpolar Mobility Consortium was created among the participating UArctic member institutions to serve the function of vetting outgoing students to other UArctic countries. This consortium has functioned extremely well and is administered from Lakehead University. Third, funding remains a challenge. In Canada, the initial n2n program was funded on a project basis, in contrast to the Nordic countries. The initial funding was for three-and-a-half years and was extended another year with a 45 percent increase in its budget. The old program from which n2n funding came no longer exists, which will require finding another government envelope. The constant hunt for project dollars is a consistent theme within UArctic that takes away critical energies from program development.

One of the most encouraging developments within the UArctic mobility program is the Verdde Program. This is an Indigenous teacher education exchange program between Nunavut Arctic College in Canada and Sami University College in Norway. The program is now in its third year and has opened up opportunities for aspiring Indigenous teachers. One of the most interesting stories about the value of UArctic involves the students themselves. In 2005, the students from Nunavut Arctic College did not have enough funding from government sources for all of the students to participate on the exchange program, so they worked several bingos themselves until they had raised enough money for every student to go. This story underscores the



importance of access to educational programs in the North. Low participation rates are not due to lack of desire—they are due to lack of access.

### **Arctic Learning Environment**

The third leg of the core initiatives, the Arctic Learning Environment (ALE), has not yet achieved the level of prominence of the first two UArctic programs. Yet, its role is essential to the success of UArctic. BCS was about curriculum and content; CMP was about mobility; and ALE was about delivery. There was considerable discussion about what exactly ALE should focus on. Was it to be about pedagogy in the northern regions in general? Was it to tackle issues around instruction in traditional face-to-face settings, around learning styles, around appropriate testing and evaluation? Or, was it to focus more narrowly and immediately on electronic means of distance delivery. For a variety of reasons, not the least of which was funding, ALE chose to take a more focused approach, concentrating primarily on distance technology and Web-course delivery. This is reflected in the description of ALE in the *Integrated Plan*:

The Arctic Learning Environment (ALE) is about using tested and affordable information technologies to move information—the content of programs like the BCS—to students separated by large distances. There is nothing hypothetical about the utility of these technologies in the Arctic context. They permit new economies of scale. Programs become possible that were previously not, because of small student numbers and the costs of bringing them together in traditional classroom settings. Equally important, the pedagogical value of new learning technologies has been clearly and repeatedly demonstrated over the past two decades. Email and list serves have proven highly effective in supporting teacher-student and peer consultation. Similarly, web-based search and online library services have transformed research at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The Arctic Learning Environment is about bringing the BCS and other programs to students in the communities in which they live.

In contrast to the Circumpolar Studies Program and the north2north student exchange program, ALE has never had an externally funded coordination office with staff dedicated to working on delivery issues. An ALE program team continues to exist and it has undertaken some work associated with a survey of the current state of Internet access across the Circumpolar North. However, the actual day-to-day work delivery is led by Athabasca University, which houses the Web portal for UArctic's core courses as it has since the start of UArctic course delivery.

### **Conclusion: Future**

It would seem that UArctic presents a dream solution, for fiscally conscious governments, to the problem of creating post-secondary education access to remote, northern communities. Building human capacity in northern communities would lead to stronger and more effective regional, local, and Aboriginal governments and would lead to greater numbers of northern residents with the skills to participate in an increasingly global economy. Yet, government support has been mixed, particularly in Canada. The initial years saw UArctic struggle to the most basic of funding levels. However, the change of government at the federal level in 2006 saw an initial doubling of UArctic funding and the current government has committed to finding a longer term solution. At the territorial-provincial level, only the Province of Saskatchewan has invested significant funding, to date, in UArctic; but, here, too, prospects seem to be improving. Comparatively, however, countries such as Finland and Norway have been much stronger supporters, even though access to post-secondary education in their Norths is not as acute.

The South often looks smugly on the North, thinking that leading-edge innovation only occurs in large urban centres and that the northern periphery is a backwater not worthy of emulation: “beyond Hope” in British Columbia or “beyond the wolf border” or outer ring road of Helsinki. UArctic is but one of many examples where the northern periphery is actually the centre of innovation.

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## Notes

1. Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Saami Council, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North.

**Key documents relevant to the University of the Arctic can be found on the *Northern Review* website < [www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/review](http://www.yukoncollege.yk.ca/review)>. These documents include:**

An Integrated Plan for the Implementation of Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, Arctic Learning Environment, and the Circumpolar Mobility Program, University of the Arctic Circumpolar Coordination Office, 2000

Foundation Principles of the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies Program, Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies Program Development Team, 1999

Launching the University of the Arctic—From Ideas to Action, Report to the Senior Arctic Officials of the Arctic Council, Rovaniemi, June 13, 2001

Shared Voices and a University of the Arctic—Views of Indigenous Peoples, Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, Saami Council, 1998