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The Evolution of Higher Education Collaboration in the Arctic Through Networking



Outi Snellman

Academic collaboration across the Arctic region—the eight nations bordering the Arctic Circle (United States, Russia, Canada, Denmark/Greenland, Finland, Norway, Sweden and Iceland)—was extremely difficult and restricted during the Cold War years, despite efforts like the establishment of UNESCO and, indeed, the International Association of Universities. Issues and problems, however, do not respect national boundaries: for example, the emergence of massive environmental problems across borders in the region became quite clear during the 1980s. The iron curtain was successful in restricting the movement of people and ideas, but not pollutants.

The University of Lapland, still the northernmost university in the European Union today, was established in 1979 as the last university in the wave of new regional universities in Finland. Other universities in what was then called the North Calotte region had been established earlier: Umeå University, Sweden (1965), Oulu University, Finland (1958), Tromsø University, Norway (1968) and Luleå University of Technology, Sweden (1971). From its creation, these northern neighbours also became the closest academic collaborators for the University of Lapland—they were, after all, founded on the same type of Nordic values. However, internationalisation was not at the core of the university's mission from the beginning. The foundations for a more focused strategy on internationalisation were laid a decade later in a broader global political process.

During the political turmoil of the 1980s, one key speech changed the history of the Arctic and laid the foundation for long-lasting environmental, political and academic cooperation in the region. This speech, held in Murmansk in 1987 by the Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, called for the Arctic to become an international 'zone of peace' and called on all the Arctic states and other regional actors to cooperate on issues of scientific research and environmental protection. This speech led to many things, for example, the creation of the International Arctic Science Committee

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in 1990 and the foundation of the Arctic Council in 1996. The higher education community, quite independently of any national governments, also immediately reacted to the speech, forming the Circumpolar Universities Association, CUA, in 1988 for enhancing international cross-border collaboration between the universities in the region. The University of the Arctic (UArctic) was established in 1998 on the initiative of the Arctic Council to complement its functions. CUA and UArctic joined forces in 1999 and became one organisation: UArctic.

The University of Lapland was one of the founding universities of the Circumpolar Universities Association in 1998 and soon took on a coordinating role for the organisation. Through this, the university also chose arctic and northern research as the core of its strategic profile and adopted the first internationalisation strategy. International mobility, international education programmes as well as research were tied to a strong focus on working in and on the Arctic. The University of Lapland also established the Arctic Centre, which remains Finland's Arctic research hub today.

In 1998, when UArctic was established, the University of Lapland merged CUA's and UArctic's International Secretariats. Through this, the University of Lapland assumed a coordinating role for the largest Arctic higher education collaboration network and also continued to keep arctic research and collaboration at the centre of its own international strategy.

From the start, UArctic was very strongly based on the values of circumpolarity, diversity and interdisciplinarity. There are four million people in the Arctic across the eight Arctic states, and numerous indigenous peoples and languages. The initial promise to the indigenous peoples was recorded into the Shared Voices Statement by the Arctic Permanent Participant organisations Inuit Circumpolar Conference, Sami Council and RAIPON, the Russian indigenous people's organisation. "With Shared Voices", symbolising collaboration and diversity, also became the vision of UArctic in its first strategic plan; this vision has survived as one of the core principles of UArctic until today.

These values are also strongly reflected in UArctic's activities from student mobility in UArctic's own north2north mobility program to the now 54 thematic networks that are engaged both in collaborative research and education.

Initially, UArctic's goal was to "empower the north", to ensure that northerners have the tools to take charge of their own destinies. This type of broad capacity-building goals is challenging when one attempts to show real impact on society. UArctic seeks to improve the lives of all northerners by increasing human competence and capacity, creating a healthy environment and bringing northern voices and knowledge to the global stage.

Just as the Arctic states and their challenges are interconnected, the Arctic is connected to the rest of the globe. The world is heavily dependent on the resources of the North: oil, gas, minerals, fish, freshwater. At the same time, although the Arctic is not the source of one of the biggest environmental challenges the globe is facing in the history of mankind, climate change, it is impacted by it in the most severe way. This is why the Arctic itself is a grand challenge: no one state, no one discipline, no one economic system or scientific paradigm can tackle the challenge alone. We need to work together, "with shared voices", in the arctic and all around the world.

Naturally, UArctic, just as the Arctic Council and other research and environmental organisations that were created in the Arctic, has a very clear additional purpose as well: ensuring peace and stability in the Arctic. Indeed, even as geopolitical insecurity elsewhere in the world creates tensions that influence the Arctic, we have continued with ‘business as usual’—not because we are ignorant of threats to cooperation, but precisely because of them. Our best way to ensure mutual understanding and focus on common interests is to maintain cooperation and keep an open dialogue through active support of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Through UArctic we have strived to create a common Arctic region and circumpolar identity among researchers, students and leaders. We will work with our membership, well over 200 organisations in 2020, as well as regional and national governments to ensure that the generation leading the Arctic in 2030 does not have to start over, but can continue on a platform of mutual understanding and partnership.

The Arctic states have both the resources and instruments for cooperation, and their peoples have the will. The leadership of the North will benefit not just the Arctic but the whole world, and we can also be an important inspiration to others globally. This is particularly the case now, at a time when humankind needs to find a new way forward for future generations and the healthy stewardship of this unique planet.

UArctic was built on the same kind of ideal for collaboration, albeit more regionally, as IAU was 40 years earlier. 2021 marks the 30th anniversary since UArctic’s Launch in 2001. In those 30 years, it has grown from a small and loose collaboration of about 30 institutions to one of the world’s largest higher education networks, organised as UArctic Association, where the power to decide on the organisation’s future direction rests with its members through the UArctic Assembly.

The next UArctic Assembly will approve UArctic’s Strategic Plan 2030 in their meeting in May 2021—the current draft is strongly based, again, on the same values of circumpolarity, diversity, respect, collaboration and openness, and the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. The University of Lapland, as a member of IAU and UArctic, continues to take forward the IAU ideals of international collaboration, respect for diversity and promotion of peace through its coordination role and engagement in UArctic.

With organisations like IAU, the Arctic Council and UArctic aligning their goals, we may indeed be one step closer to making the prospect of healthy futures for the North and the globe a reality.

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