

John Ralston Saul
Nunavut has the Right to a University

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It is a great honour to be back in the Arctic, where I have been coming for 41 years. At first I knew absolutely nothing. That was the way we were educated in the south. To be ignorant about the reality of most of the country. Now there are days when I feel I understand a tiny bit, thanks to friends all over Nunavut, including Aaju Peter and Susan Aglukark, who are part of our group speaking tonight.

But so little.

Alethea Araquq-Baril has just made a very fine argument. I am really looking forward to seeing her film *Angry Inuk*. What she said was a reminder of our need to bring mythology in line with reality. And reality in line with mythology. For example, everyone talks today about reconciliation. But how can there be reconciliation without restitution. In other words, reconciliation is much more than emotion. Reconciliation must be about reestablishing a fair reality. Or another example: Everyone here knows that at the heart of what needs to be done in Nunavut lies Inuit Qaujisarvinqat – IQ – Inuit knowledge. And this, of course, is centred in the knowledge of Elders. At the same time there are wonderful new projects like Qaggiavuut – the Nunavut performing arts centre project – which will help to create the new social infrastructure necessary to link the past with the future. The Chair of Qaggiavuut, Vinnie Karetak, is here tonight.

One thing is certain, education has always lain at the heart of civilization – all civilizations. It may be traditional education coming from Elders or formal school and university-based education. Or a blend of the two.

You may have heard about the wonderful land-based education offered by Dechinta university outside Yellowknife - a fascinating model led by Indigenous people. It is certainly an approach which could spread to campuses across the north. It is also – and intentionally – an intense experience available to few.

But do not forget:

Canada remains the only circumpolar country without fully fledged universities in the Arctic. All the other countries, with less money, smaller populations and smaller territory – except for Russia – have northern universities. Greenland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Finland. All of them have healthy, functioning, northern universities. None of these were created by using the arcane rules of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, which by size and technical structure are designed to force the imitation of the southern model. The northern universities created in other countries usually began in an experimental form, taking into account the north, the people of the

north and their cultures. These universities usually began very small and tried to find ways to combine the best of the north with the best of the south.

When I am talking about northern universities I am not talking about colleges. Nor am I minimizing the importance of colleges. Colleges have a valuable, but different function. What they already offer is incredibly valuable. But it would be a mistake in the Arctic to confuse these two functions.

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The central truth is simple: it is good for people everywhere in Canada to study the Arctic and to be able to study the Arctic in their local universities. But Arctic higher education needs to be centred in the Arctic. Arctic research belongs in the Arctic. Arctic healthcare training, legal training, architecture, engineering, all belong in the Arctic.

Why is so much of Canada's polar bear expertise in a southern university? Why is university-based northern expertise locked into Victoria, Calgary, Quebec City, all across the south?

Why? One thing is certain: this system brings tens of millions of dollars to southern universities every year. This continues the domination of southerners in northern fields of study. This marginalizes northern culture and the full role of the Inuktitut language in the development of northern expertise. This marginalizes the influence of both IQ and the Elders. This continues the southern-European-linear approach to the north, again marginalizing ideas and approaches developed here.

Without universities in the north, the whole wealth creation and community creation function is missing here. The capacity to inspire northern students in their own territories is missing here.

Some people say you must work from the bottom up – first K to 12, and then colleges, and only then a university. But this has not been true anywhere else. It was not done this way in southern Canada or elsewhere in the world. It was not done this way in other circumpolar countries. Post-secondary education has always been central to creating and developing the K to 12 structure. Universities are central to developing a language like Inuktitut for school curriculum.

In education you must push and pull at the same time. Build the K to 12 system with a strong Inuktitut component. But build the leadership and the intellectual component at the same time, also with a strong Inuktitut component. Historically the college system has usually come third.

A study was done in 2016 by KPMG recommending against an Arctic university, putting the government in an impossible position. I believe it was a classic consultant report serving the old interests. When I look at what they proposed, I cannot think of a system more likely to reinforce the wealth and the influence of the southern universities; a system in which the southern institutions get to shape and, in effect, to own programming delivered through northern colleges.

As I far as I can make out, the KPMG report was designed as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It began from the assumption that whatever was done would have to meet the size and structure criteria of southern

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universities, while at the same time being an efficient and not overly expensive investment thanks to the southern concept of the mass delivery of post-secondary education. It also did not seem to take into account the reality that students from elsewhere in Canada and elsewhere in the world would want to come to an Arctic university; that Indigenous people from around the world would find this an interesting place to study; that this would in turn strengthen the influence of Inuit culture.

The creation of a university in the Arctic should not be premised on a southern idea of size. Nor should it be a prisoner of European models, as the southern universities like to insist. Nor is this about money. There is lots of money for northern post-secondary education. It is all going to southern universities. Those universities need to look at themselves in the mirror. They need to look at their ethical obligation to give back to the north what it is due.

In the absence of a university in the Arctic, young Inuit do not have local role models at the post-secondary level. They do not have a local context in which to identify themselves as leaders; a place to build self-confidence.

Without a relationship to northern culture in its own right, without a relationship to the land, there can be no convincing idea of northern education.

There is already amazing research being done in Nunavut in many, many areas. But without a university the essential coordinating mechanism is missing – the mechanism which encourages a maximization of this work.

The tenacity, courage, imagination and creativity of the people of Nunavut has been more than proved over so many impossible decades. What is missing today is the willingness of southern Canada to fully come to terms with its continuing obligation to be supportive. And an arctic university is part of that obligation.

Let me end where I began. For four decades I have been lucky enough to travel around the Arctic. Each time I find myself with an amazing and growing leadership of successive generations – young people who believe in the need for a real university. And also southerners who have become northerners. I am constantly meeting young Inuit leaders who could invent systems of northern education which would serve their people, but also influence people elsewhere in Canada and beyond.

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