

# WHY WE NEED A CANADIAN ARCTIC UNIVERSITY

**Teevi Mackay**  
Jane Glassco Northern Fellow

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The Gordon Foundation undertakes research, leadership development and public dialogue so that public policies in Canada reflect a commitment to collaborative stewardship of our freshwater resources and to a people-driven, equitable and evolving North. Our mission is to promote innovative public policies for the North and in fresh water management based on our values of independent thought, protecting the environment, and full participation of indigenous people in the decisions that affect their well-being. Over the past quarter century The Gordon Foundation has invested over \$27 million in a wide variety of northern community initiatives and freshwater protection initiatives.



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The Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship is a policy and leadership development program that recognizes leadership potential among young northern Canadians who want to address the emerging policy challenges facing the North. The two year long program is built around four regional gatherings and offers skills training, mentorship and networking opportunities. Through self-directed learning, group work and the collective sharing of knowledge, Fellows will foster a deeper understanding of important contemporary northern issues, and develop the skills and confidence to better articulate and share their ideas and policy research publicly. The Fellowship is intended for young northerners between 25 and 35 years of age, who want to build a strong North that benefits all northerners. Through the Fellowship, we hope to foster a bond among the Fellows that will endure throughout their professional lives and support a pan-northern network.

## TEEVI MACKAY

Jane Glassco Northern Fellow

Teevi Mackay grew up in Iqaluit, Nunavut, and considers it her home. She currently lives in Ottawa and works at Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami as editor of Inuktitut, Canada's longest-publishing Inuit language periodical.

She is a graduate of Carleton University's School of Journalism and Nunavut Sivuniksavut, and has held positions at the Government of Nunavut and the Government of Canada. Teevi also writes a regular youth column for Above & Beyond magazine. Her columns have covered Inuit education, Inuit knowledge, acquisition of Inuktitut, the importance of identity, and food security in the Arctic.

Teevi enjoys sewing, especially parkas that combine modern style and traditional Inuit patterns.

### Fellow Focus

As a Jane Glassco Northern Fellow, Teevi will look at universities based in circumpolar nations to discover how Canada can establish an Arctic university of its own. She hopes to increase her knowledge of policy development, and is excited to build upon her leadership skills.



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Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland

Titken Jacobsen

**N**uuk, Greenland: “When home-rule was introduced in 1979, actually earlier, with the ethnic awakenings in the mid-70s in Greenland, one of the first things politicians wanted was to get the university home away from Copenhagen, home to Greenland,” said Per Langgaard, one of the founding members of Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland. Langgaard was interviewed at the university in September 2014.

The founding *Kalaaleq* (Greenlander) is Robert Petersen, the founder and professor as rector of the university, following the establishment of Greenland Home Rule in 1979.

“It [Ilisimatusarfik] started as a very

small institute in 1984 with only 11 students and just a handful of teachers. Then it has evolved today as a university with nine programs, 600 full-time students and around 120 employees; of those we have 30 researchers,” said Tina Pars the Rector of Ilisimatusarfik in her office (in September 2014).

Pars added to this history: “The political ambition was of course to strengthen the language, to strengthen the Greenlandic identity, the nation-building, it was also part of that ambition, but also lots of reports were done by Danish universities, consultants, that Greenland should do their reports themselves.”

On February 1, 1984, the very first

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students of Ilisimatusarfik began their studies, where the focus was predominantly on the cultural identity of Greenland, said Langgaard. Subjects included “Greenlandic grammar, Greenlandic literature, Greenlandic history, and a Greenlandic framework in political science.” However, this approach to their “community university” conflicted with public opinion and public interest, including the aims of the politicians – a pressure to champion academics and not just the subjective Greenlandic values, according to *To be a Very Small University, in a Very Small Society*, written by Per Langgaard.

This includes Nuka Møller, who was part of the first cohort of students to earn a B.A. Both Langgaard and Pars said that in the beginning it was not easy, but through their hard work and perseverance, they have come a long way.

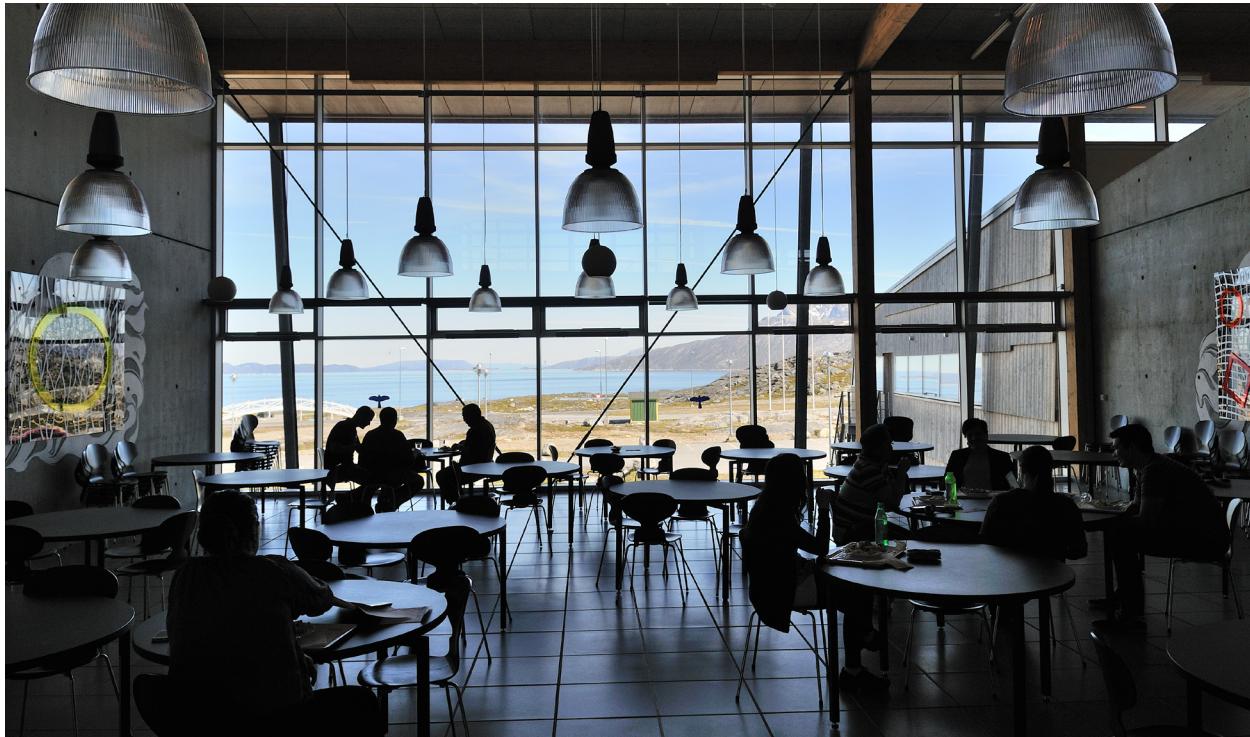
Nuka Møller, interviewed Ilisimatusarfik (September 2014), now part of its faculty, said, “We were just a very small group... and seeing 600-plus students in this huge building...it’s mind-boggling that it could happen so fast. It has taken our country into the modern age. Something to be proud of — we have a university and you meet people here who are the most clever people in the country and it’s a privilege and you feel proud... It makes me feel proud that we were just a small group and our group has evolved into more than double and to see people potentially working for your country in the future, it’s very promising and it makes me really glad.”

Per Langgaard, when asked what he would say to himself back in the beginning of the start of Ilisimatusarfik, said, “I wouldn’t have done it differently. I’m proud of what we did and I believe it was the best of all solutions we reached in those days. So there was a process, we kind of started in the symbolic end, we believed very much in traditional values, we believed in creating a University in all respect differed from all universities in the world — we wouldn’t have to import European values and European ways of doing things. We realized it was not possible to avoid it but I believe that in the process of understanding that we couldn’t avoid it, we managed to keep close to our local society. So had we given up from the onset and said ‘no we cannot make a local university, we need to go mainstream’ then I really firmly believe the university of today would be very different.”

Langgaard said that because they started Ilisimatusarfik from the symbolic (subjective Greenlandic values) and because they were confident that they could make an alternative, they actually managed to keep those ideals afloat and weave them into the structure of the university today. He said, “I believe that the process has been healthy and that we have the right to be proud of it.” He also added, “I think it’s important to know that when you start a university, the start might be tedious and you kind of crawl along the floor for quite some years, but then it will start rising.”

That rise includes a current student, Aili Liimakka Laue, a third-year student

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The dining area of Ilisimatusarfik

Titken Jacobsen

at the Ilisimatusarfik who studies Social/Political Science, Law/International Law and Economics. She is the Youth Delegate representing the National Inuit Youth Council in Greenland. Laue, in an interview at her home in Nuuk, Greenland in September 2014, said, "It can be a downside if we have to take a whole degree abroad." She said that a Greenlandic student studying abroad might start a family and might be more likely not to move back to Greenland. "That's kind of a problem." She also commented on the fact that her program at Ilisimatusarfik allows her to design her curriculum that relates to her own community and its own use to give back to her community.

This fact that Ilisimatusarfik is on Greenland's soil is an important aspect, because it gives its people the option to stay home and become educated at a high level, without having to leave friends, family, and culture, and gives protection for keeping your own people at home.

Per Langgaard said that Greenlanders who travel abroad to study create a "brain-drain" in Greenland and said, "When at 20 years of age – one of the driving forces of life is love and finding a mate. And if we export our youth to Copenhagen, then they will most likely end up with a Danish spouse. And then they will have children and the children will be Danes, which will drag our students to Denmark and

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reduce the possibility of being back home.” Speaking of studying at Ilisimatusarfik, Langgaard said, “That is a tremendous strength of being home: it’s simple and it’s practical and it’s straightforward.”

Langgaard spoke about the mindset of Greenland back before Ilisimatusarfik was created and said that back in the 1970s and ‘80s nobody believed it could be done, so the very first wall to turn over was “we can do it, it’s possible and the first bachelors actually did it: they got out in school, they were the first ones, so they may not have been work champions, they definitely were not, they lacked quite a bit of academic skills. They started from deep down, they had to be lifted.”

Langgaard said that without a university in Greenland, there was a horrible ”brain drain” and many who travelled abroad to study failed, and he said it is not good for the human mind to fail in this manner. The success of the university today caters to its society, its people and culture which instills confidence in them.

Currently there is no university in Canada’s North. However, there are some promising political steps being taken. The Nunavut Education Minister, Paul Quassa, at a “University in the Arctic” session at the ArcticNet conference in Ottawa in December 2014, spoke about what a university in Canada’s Arctic would look like. Quassa said, “It needs to be a place where it is accessible, that supports a student, and academic population, have other physical infrastructure to attract

researchers and have a vibrancy that contributes to academic and research excellence,” reported Nunatsiaq News in December 2014. Quassa was a signatory for the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement that was signed in 1993.

“By international standards, Canada lags behind all the circumpolar states in a hugely critical area: it is the only one that has no university in its Arctic region” wrote Greg Poelzer in *Northern Exposure: Peoples, Powers and Prospects in Canada’s North* Volume IV.

“It also is surprising given the North’s pressing social and economic needs – the correlation between educational achievement and improved life outcomes is well documented. As Thomas Berger argues, ‘A country’s education system is expected to equip its people with the skills, particularly the language skills, necessary to take up gainful employment. You can’t speak of employment without speaking of education,’” wrote Poelzer.

Aili Liimakka Laue, the third year student at the Ilisimatusarfik, said that skepticism can be good criticism, but said that, “There is nothing to be skeptical about if it’s a university. Because we have universities all over the world, small ones and big ones, and it doesn’t matter how big or small they are – it matters how they serve your people and I think that it’s the most precious gift we have – we can give ourselves, to educate our own people, and in that level as well. I think every community needs a university; every country, region and every people need one.”

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Sara Jakobsen, a Ilisimatusarfik journalism program graduate, working at KNR, Greenland's media centre

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Laue said that Ilisimatusarfik has a good history and that it keeps developing now through its nine institutes. “It’s only an encouragement for other Inuit regions to do the same.” Her positive outlook was evident in her interview.

Lastly Laue said, “We have the best educational system in the whole world; we get paid, we get tuition fees and everything, and we almost get free homes, they’re very, very cheap. It doesn’t matter how many kids you have, you have your right to education and we have that and we should use that,” which is the reality for many northerners in Canada, too. “Whoever has the opportunity to build a university should do so and start from there.”

Nuka Møller, one of the first Ilisimatusarfik students, says this about university education: “It will advance your people, the mindset of your people to the ideas and challenges for today and you will develop tools to cope with these challenges and help your community to advance academically, using your own language and also other languages, being firmly grounded in your local culture but also looking out to the rest of the world.”

Greg Poelzer argues that Canada needs a national policy “... on northern education involving federal and territorial collaboration, and that creating access to comprehensive university education should be, along with existing educational

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commitments, a key priority.”

Marina Kalinina, University of the Arctic Vice-President Interregional Cooperation, Vice President International Relations, Northern (Arctic) Federal University (NArFU) wrote this in Shared Voices magazine 2014: “Arctic research is an actively developing area. As interest in the Arctic region increases due to rapidly growing development, the need for specialists capable of solving problems in different fields of knowledge likewise increases. This need is one of the factors shaping the demand for higher education in the North,” echoing Poelzer’s point above.

Carleton University Professor Frances Abele, the co-editor of *Northern Exposure: People’s Powers and Prospects in Canada’s North* wrote an op-ed for *Nunatsiaq News* in October 2010, entitled “Canada Needs a University in the North.” Abele says Northerners need to create and build the society that will “sustain their dreams embodied in the new institutions.” Abele said that northern students should have the same right as southerners to study close to home.

Abele said that a Canadian northern university would be well placed to create its own “distinctive curriculum and research agenda that would be infused with the knowledge and ways of living of the North’s many cultures.” Abele added that a northern university would benefit the people, communities and society as a whole in the way in which universities do: “by providing the means to share human

knowledge, in all its glorious diversity.”

Lastly, Abele writes in the op-ed, “The government has suggested that the Cambridge Bay research centre’s opening in 2017 intended to mark Canada’s 150th birthday. It would [be] fitting, and even more laudable, if a northern university system could also be launched the same year.”

The ArcticNet-funded research project entitled *Improving Access to University for Inuit* managed by Professor Thierry Rodon of Université Laval (also co-managed by Professor Frances Abele) had the following results after surveys, interviews, workshops and focus groups with Inuit who have experience in post-secondary education (this research was conducted between 2009 and 2013). The leading factor to attain education for Inuit was their personal educational goals and their enjoyment of learning, while others cited wanting a better job or promotion. It is clear from the research findings that Inuit rely heavily on strong support from others, including family and peers within their own learning environment, meaning being at home – in the North.

Also, “Overwhelmingly, respondents reported that having an instructor with knowledge of the North was important whether he or she were Inuit or not.” While “72% of survey respondents reported it was ‘extremely important’ that Inuktitut be included in courses offered to Inuit students,” according to Rodon’s final research paper *Improving Access to University*

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Journalism students in class at Ilisimatusarfik

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*Education in the Canadian Arctic. Learning from the Past Experiences and Listening to Inuit Students' Experience.* This paper was submitted to the McGill Journal of Education on October 8, 2014.

A workshop participant in Rodon's project said, "When mainstream ways of doing things are imposed, it generally doesn't work out well." During the research period at an Ottawa workshop it was evident that "being part of a close learning community increased their confidence and their likelihood of success" and it is "more difficult when they take programs in which they may not have Inuit peers." Looking back to Greenland, Per Langgaard said he would never teach a class without having at

least one group activity at Ilisimatusarfik; this echoes the reported importance of valuing community within the learning environment.

It was found in Rodon's research paper that students who study in the North feel they need to "remain in a familiar environment with access to important cultural activities and practices, maintain easy access to a network of people who offer support, live close to relatives, be in classes with few students, learn Inuktitut, and have access to Arctic foods." Also from this research it was "obvious that many would still prefer to remain in the North given the choice."

Students who want to stay in the North,

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based on Rodon's research, are limited in terms of the programs that are available at the colleges, but if they move South for university, "they face other barriers and challenges," while universities in the South do not offer Inuit-gearred programs while being mainstream educational institutions.

The Gordon Foundation published the paper *Dialogue Toward a University in Northern Canada: Preliminary survey results that were done online*. One Yukon respondent said, "Having an Arctic University will tell northern young people and students that there is a place to go where their lives, experiences, and cultures are reflected in the curriculum and learning outcomes that they are about to invest their lives in. Not having a university in the North tells the same group that they not only have to translate their unique northern lives to a southern context to succeed in school, but they must in turn translate the very different southern experience to the northern context – a daunting task."

Another respondent from the Northwest Territories wrote that university education allows you to think about the bigger picture, the world outside the North (how it works) regardless of the program of study. If the North is to soar and take leadership of its own destiny, instead of outsiders coming in and taking over (southerners), "this screams more university graduates from the North in the North."

In the same paper, 54 per cent of respondents said that it is extremely

important to establish a university in the North, while 86 per cent said as a whole that not only is it extremely important but that it is very important. Two-thirds of respondents say that it was either very or extremely important to have a Canadian northern university that provides programs in Aboriginal languages, while 81 per cent of respondents surveyed felt that a northern university should have courses that reflect Aboriginal subjective values and culture.

Karen Langgaard, an associate professor at Greenland's Ilisimatusarfik, who has also been there since its beginning, said in an interview at the university in September 2014, relating it to Canada's situation of not having a Northern university, "I have always thought in modern times you haven't got the choice to do it halfway. That means you have to educate the young people in a manner that's to such a degree that they can compete with southern Canadians because otherwise it's not a healthy way to work together... They would be more interpreters for southern Canadians. It's really about keeping up the standards, really demanding what should be demanded from the young people. If they are going to be teachers then they should be teachers in a manner that is equivalent to the southerners. They can do their stuff about northern issues, but they have to have knowledge about methods and they have to be able to work on their own. They have to be the equivalent but the northern equivalent."

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Pars Langgaard, one of the founding members of Ilisimatusarfik, being interviewed at the university

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Karen Langgaard also said that some of Ilisimatusarfik's students do begin their studies at a lower academic level than needed for university-level learning, but the professors work towards developing their academic capabilities through "nursing" them. This is done through their smaller classes and also because they are aware of the culture and way of life of their students.

Per Langgaard said that of the eight members of the first set of bachelor graduates of Ilisimatusarfik, all are now, in his words, "big shots" in Greenland society. Langgaard recalled, as mentioned earlier, "They started from deep down, they had to be lifted and maybe they were not lifted high enough, that's true... they were much

better than what used to be before them and they spoke Greenlandic, so they kind of set the wagon rolling so the next generation had a starting point, said 'OK, that can be done.'"

The Nunavut Sivuniksavut (NS) Training Program based in Ottawa, Ontario, is a perfect example of curriculum being created specifically for the culture of the people it is teaching and training. NS is a college certificate-training program for Nunavut students to learn about their political present-day reality, Nunavut's land claim history, Inuit history, culture and language. This learning model is a perfect start for a university in the North and can be adapted for the North so that northerners do not

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have to be forced to move South to study. Even Aili Liimakka Laue, the third year Ilisimatusarfik student, cited this college as being a great example for Canadian Inuit to earn education at higher levels.

Professor Thierry Rodon, the project manager for *Improving Access to University for Inuit* was also an instructor of public administration for the second year certificate program at NS (students can access this program after graduating from the first year certificate program). From his research, that actually stemmed from experience teaching at NS, he found that the disadvantages for Inuit studying in the South include: being away from home, away from family and friends, disconnected to the land (part of their intrinsic culture), and homesickness. This gives all the more reason to have a university in Canada's North.

During the 1990s, the University of the Arctic was created, an online university to bring university-level learning to the circumpolar regions of the world, which includes Canada. However, the Canadian North is still without a "bricks and mortar" northern university, writes Kelly Black in his forthcoming paper *Tracing the Idea of Northern University: Competing Visions for Post-Secondary Education in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, 1945-1999*.

Black also writes, "Whatever structure a northern university may take, we must be cautious of projects that view university education in the North as simply an opportunity for nation building or the

expansion of southern knowledge systems; the debates and discussions of the past deserve much greater study and reflection as we look to the future."

There is still an educational-attainment deficit, even though many Inuit are attending university, more so than ever before, as "the gap between Inuit and the rest of Canadians in terms of university completion is widening," wrote Poelzer in *Northern Exposure: People's Powers and Prospects in Canada's North*.

Poelzer wrote that, "The federal government has a clear fiduciary responsibility to invest more in education and an Arctic university would be a good starting point."

To conclude, Per Langgaard said at Ilisimatusarfik, when they first started the university, they were crawling, even saying that at times he taught one-on-one, just with one student in the class. Now the university boasts 600-plus students with programs that are further developing from the social sciences, into business and economics, and will still develop but could only do so by starting out somewhere, even with just one student.



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