

# **A university without walls**

**By Carter Hammett**



**In a learning environment without walls, there exists a world of opportunity. Since its humble Finland launch in 2001 as one of the world's first online learning institutions, The University of the Arctic (UA) has grown from an enrolment of about 20 students to more than 600 world-wide.**

**More of a learning network than an institution, the UA is actually a partnership of post-secondary institutions, non-profit organizations and others interested in fostering higher education and research in the north. More than 90 member agencies spread across eight countries surrounding the north pole — including Canada, Russia, Finland, The United States and Scandinavian countries — share resources, facilities and expertise to deliver in-class and online courses of study for students living in, and studying the north.**

**Unlike many students who leave smaller communities for urban environments, about 70% of all northern graduates remain in the north, says Greg Poelzer, UA's dean of undergraduate students.**

**By delivering a wide variety of courses that are significant to northerners, Poelzer emphasizes the importance of subject relevancy to UA's students. "Studies cut across cultures and keeps relevancy close to home," he says. "One of the most striking features of these programs is learning about ourselves within our own communities.**

**“We’re all guilty of navel-gazing in our own countries without knowing our northern neighbours,” Poelzer says, “In our programs, students can be comparative and interdisciplinary; for northern studies, it’s impossible not to be. Students need to know policy, cultural concerns, environmental concerns ... all of these interface and come to bear heavily on our programs.”**

**UA combines the latest in distance learning technology with classroom studies and traditional knowledge passed down from generations of indigenous elders.**

**Chief among UA’s programs is a Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies degree which offers learners the opportunity to study issues of the circumpolar world and prepares them for advanced study or careers in fields that include sustainable resource management, Arctic engineering and northern tourism. Significant weight is given to matters addressing aboriginal communities of the circumpolar north. Poelzer is quick to point out that 80% of the curriculum is written by northern institutions, and a further 20% is designed by aboriginal scholars, a figure, Poelzer says, that is unprecedented.**

**Students enrol in courses of interest through their home institutions, which also deliver the degree. Discussion forums create a major vehicle for students who share common educational interests, yet live in different countries.**

**“An aboriginal student can post a picture of a fish caught in his community, and students in Norway can post pictures that show their life. Often, you can’t get this kind of information as a researcher,” Poelzer says. “It opens the world to students; it’s like living in a virtual exchange program.”**

**Each participating institution has a site co-ordinator who moderates lectures and discussion forums. Administratively, programs are distributed across member agencies. Undergraduate studies, for example, are co-ordinated by The University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, while the UA’s Northern Research Forum Secretariat is located in Iceland.**

**Norway is the co-ordinating country for UA’s North2North (N2N) program, a learning mobility initiative, where students apply to a partner country and go abroad to study topics of relevance for four**

**months. “With most exchange programs, the kids are typically middle-class and disproportionately represented. Northern and non-aboriginal students typically don’t participate in programs like this. Now they have that opportunity,” Poelzer says. This is Canada’s second year of involvement with N2N.**

**While UA does not yet offer graduate programs, the university’s field school does offer a number of brief, thematic courses in northern locations with a diverse analysis that prepares researchers at member institutions for studies in relevant fields. PhD networks promote regional sustainability and cultivate academic communities among northern researchers, and promote opportunities for dialogues with policymakers.**

**Recently, a British Columbia student became UA’s first online graduate, and gradually, more individuals are lending their voices to bring attention to northern concerns globally.**

**“The original idea of UA was to build accessible, relevant, interdisciplinary education in the early years, and now we’re doing it; in fact, exceeding expectations” Poelzer says. “We are arriving at a common understanding and building regions through education.”**

**For more information about University of the Arctic visit:  
[www.uarctic.org](http://www.uarctic.org).**

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