

FEATURE

Sharing a Voice: Early-Career Scholars and the Arctic

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Sharing a Voice: Early-Career Scholars and the Arctic

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Synopsis

At the University of the Arctic Rectors' Forum, held on 23rd of August 2017 at the University of Aberdeen, Early-Career Scholars collaboratively developed a proposal on the Forum theme of *The Inhabited Arctic: Lands, Peoples and Scholarship in the Circumpolar North*. This interdisciplinary group focused on developing opportunities in circumpolar scholarship, tackling the pressing challenges of geopolitical circumstances, scarce research funding and shifting national agendas. The following feature embodies a shared voice focussed on promoting capacity building in the UArctic and enhancing accessibility of teaching and research in the North. The wider recognition of this shared voice is vital for sustainability.

Keywords: Early-Career Scholars, University of the Arctic, research funding, collaboration, interdisciplinarity.

Introduction

There has been an observable trend of politicians and business leaders beginning to appreciate that the Arctic and its peoples have a fundamental role to play in the ongoing life of the world, and in its future prosperity. Yet Arctic research and education are threatened as never before – chiefly by funding cuts and by recent political developments across the globe. At a recent Forum of the University of the Arctic¹ (UArctic), a group of Early-Career Scholars generated a proposal aimed at bolstering Arctic Science through fostering new research and promoting its practitioners. It is hoped that this proposal – unusual in that it arises out of an exclusively early-career perspective – may contain useful suggestions for similar initiatives in the worldwide academic community.

¹ <https://www.uarctic.org/>

The inspiration for this piece emerged at the UArctic Rectors' Forum held at the University of Aberdeen in August 2017. UArctic is the world's first non-territorial University and incorporates a series of partnerships with Universities from across the Arctic. Rectors from UArctic Universities meet annually to discuss research, teaching, and networking. Every year, the Rectors also invite undergraduate and postgraduate representatives from their respective Universities to attend a parallel Student Forum. Accordingly, in 2017, student delegates arrived from diverse disciplines and Universities across North America, Europe, and Asia, to work with an interdisciplinary team of doctoral and post-doctoral researchers from the University of Aberdeen facilitating as tutors.

In line with UArctic's vision for rethinking and reshaping cutting-edge, collaborative, circumpolar research, the Student Forum was an opportunity for the visiting student delegates and Aberdeen tutors to meet in a working group to tackle current issues and to present a joint proposal to the Rectors of UArctic member institutions. The conversations in this working group centred around exploring how disciplines in the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities could work together to advance understanding of the circumpolar North – and how this research could best assist inhabitants of the North in responding to the challenges of global environmental, economic, and political change. Conversely, the group explored ways in which the traditional knowledge of northern peoples could help shape the agendas for future circumpolar research.

The Student Forum offered an alternative lens on the issues and initiatives that the Rectors were discussing. Early-Career Scholars are ideally positioned to evaluate educational institutions from the inside. In addition, many of them are acutely aware of the precariousness of academic employment and research. Their input concerning the increasing threats to the economic and political resources that underpin Arctic Science is thus extremely valuable.

The Student Forum working group, during a presentation to the Rectors at the end of the Forum, proposed several practical suggestions to promote interdisciplinary studies, to strengthen Indigenous participation in research design and writing, and to build capacity in the Arctic with an emphasis on keeping Early-Career Scholars in the profession during this difficult economic climate.

The Proposal

The group's discussions gave rise to a joint statement, which was shared with the Rectors:

"We are very glad to be part of the University of the Arctic, and of its future. We are eager to participate in the University of the Arctic's efforts to promote ethical, innovative, accessible research and teaching – which challenges stereotypes, while enabling all voices and perspectives to be heard, both indigenous and non-indigenous. Northern and Arctic research reveals again and again the interconnectedness of our world, and its power to surprise us, and recreate itself anew. We appreciate the challenges that academic research in the North currently faces, from a number of quarters. Our capacities to foster indigenous participation,

opportunities for people with demonstrated need, and to integrate the humanities and natural sciences are considerably hindered by the curtailing of our financial resources... Geopolitical relationships are changing fast, as we are all well aware. We believe that these challenges are in fact opportunities, and especially for the University of the Arctic. In the power vacuum left by a lack of clear leadership from key political players, the University of the Arctic, itself an innovative and unconventional institution, can foster new ways of generating top-quality, ethical, and accessible research and teaching, even outside the academy. A huge part of this is making the best use of the capacity the northern academic community already has, in the form of its young scholars – whether they are students, or fully trained postdoctoral researchers”.

The proposal incorporated three interlinked approaches: a bottom-up approach consisting of actions for which emerging scholars can take ownership; a top-down approach aimed at actions the UArctic Rectors can take individually and in small groups; and an institutional approach aimed at actions the UArctic as a unified body can undertake.

Appropriately, the working group’s suggestions began with a bottom-up focus on what young scholars can do to ensure their voices are heard. Many of these suggestions addressed practical measures, such as formally replacing the name of “UArctic students” to “UArctic Early-Career Scholars”.

This may appear to be trivial, however the group felt the connotation of “students” potentially reinforces the hierarchical relationship between academic staff and students, distancing the latter from decision-making processes. Acknowledging students as Early-Career Scholars inspires them to be equal members and engaged participants of the UArctic, both now and into the future. Furthermore, with the rise of adjuncting and other casualised positions, the term ‘Scholar’ was thought to be more inclusive than, for example ‘Researcher’. Another recommendation was that UArctic Early-Career representatives sit in all relevant UArctic Rectors’ meetings, including business meetings.

This would allow Early-Career Scholars the space and recognition organically to create opportunities and to promote a democratic ethos. For this reason, the group advocated the formation of a new committee, elected annually and a constitution to go with it. In a reference to the wider ‘UArctic’ this committee was provisionally dubbed “Youth Arctic”. The committee would be tasked with facilitating constructive communication among Early-Career Scholars and between Early-Career Scholars and Rectors. This would secure continuity and cohesion within the institution of UArctic, the UArctic Rectors and “Youth Arctic”. The constitution would establish the roles, rules, and objectives of “Youth Arctic”. During our meetings, it was decided that the constitution needs to have the spirit of a *shared voice* that is academically strong and valid, reasonable, loud enough to be heard and tolerant. Indigenous voices need to be an integral part of this. In particular, it was felt that promoting research that encourages Indigenous participants as co-authors and co-designers would facilitate a fusion of academic studies that work *with*, rather than *on*, specific Indigenous communities. In the digital landscape, “Youth Arctic” will develop the digital infrastructure to communicate these and

other concerns through a wide range of social media platforms that boost its networking and impact through technologies such as blogs, list servers, etc. In addition to this digital outreach, a variety of teaching methods and methodologies should be encouraged in order to engage more participants and increase opportunities and inclusion.

Turning to the second, top-down approach, the working group acknowledged that Rectors need to take a proactive role in supporting UArctic Early-Career Scholars. Rectors were requested to encourage the committee and to promote its constitution to other stakeholders (Early-Career Scholars, academic staff, politicians, business leaders, and community leaders), in their capacity as University leaders and as prominent members of their respective communities. In a similar vein, the working group further highlighted to the Rectors that Early-Career Scholars are likely to be the first to bear the brunt of economic upheaval. To combat this uncertainty the working group suggested that Rectors collaborate whenever possible, fostering and facilitating new and existing research networks and funding streams, to ensure the security of support for Early-Career Scholars to commence or continue their research.

There is a persistent need to build and maintain intellectual capacity in academic settings, and Early-Career Scholars' dedicated work should be accorded the value it deserves. The working group reiterated that funding opportunities need to be secured not only for Early-Career Scholars but also for Indigenous participation in UArctic meetings, as well as to promote greater educational opportunities for Indigenous people more widely. Besides focusing on the underrepresentation of Early-Career Scholars and Indigenous people in UArctic, the Rectors were urged to make new thematic proposals as representative as possible. This would encourage the *shared voices* we seek to empower. An interdisciplinary approach that advocates Indigenous peoples' input should be actively incorporated wherever applicable. This is particularly relevant in place-based education, which the working group endorses and sees as especially promising for circumpolar research and pedagogy. Such cases illustrate a larger mission of education, to create synergies which improve the quality of life in communities from within.

Finally, the third, institutional approach took us back to the theme of a *shared voice* and highlighted ways in which UArctic can address some of the uncertainty of the future. The working group felt that success hinged on the realisation that the *Arctic is not an island*. The common voice of Arctic scholarship and education, embodied by UArctic, needs to be shared with other voices from the rest of the world. A great many academic, environmental, political, and economic issues affect everyone; examples include climate change and sustainability. UArctic, as an institution, should take a leading role in emphasising North-South relations to politicians, businesses, and research organisations. Refocusing some of the dialogue would also challenge assumptions about the Arctic as well as fostering more connections and networks for research collaboration and funding.

In summary, the Students' Forum acknowledged that in the face of changing geopolitical circumstances, scarce research-funding, and shifting national agendas on Arctic scholarship, much of the capacity for changes that are sustainable in time is under threat. In this current economic climate and unsettling political era, it was felt that Early-Career Researchers were most at risk. Therefore, the resolution of this Students' Forum focused on developing the positions of young scholars in circumpolar scholarship, as a way of promoting capacity building in UArctic, and the accessibility of teaching and research in the North.

The "Youth Arctic" would ensure both that the voices of Early-Career Scholars are being heard, and the sustainability of this collaborative endeavour. The success of "Youth Arctic", however, relies on the combined efforts of Early-Career Scholars, Rectors, and other stakeholders.