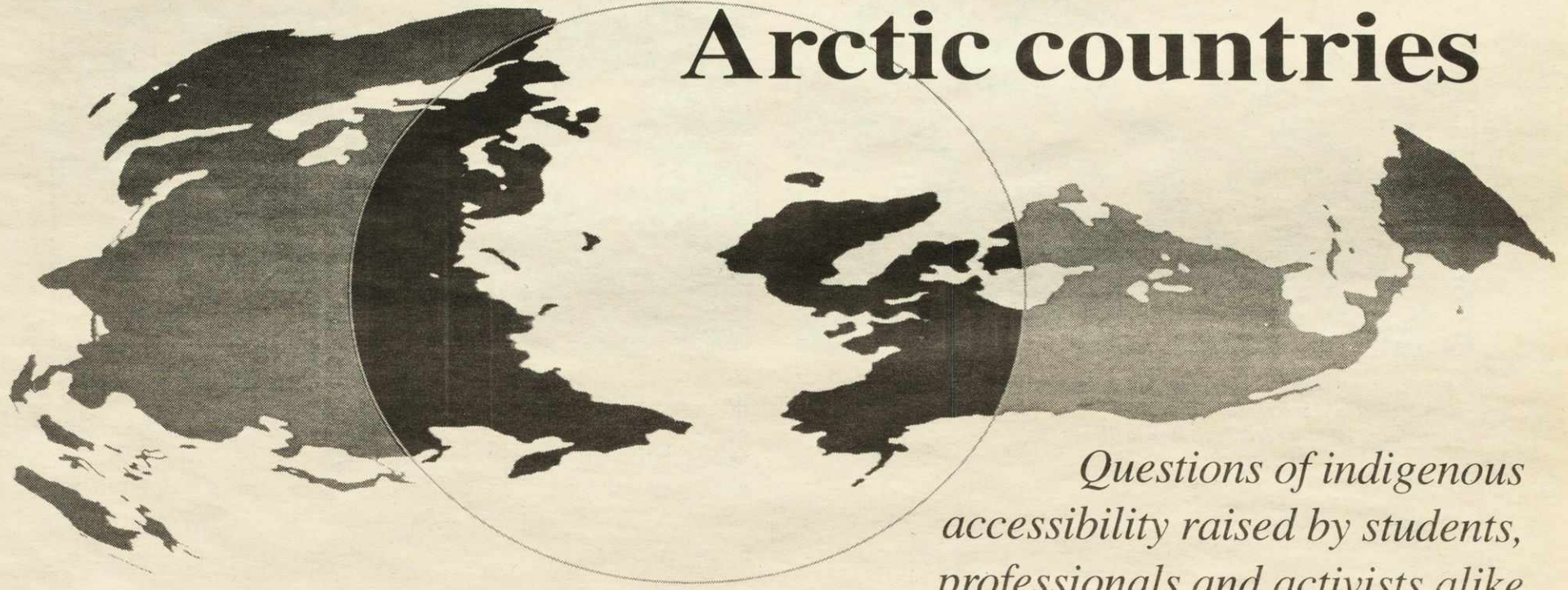


FOCUS

Northern university to bond Arctic countries



Questions of indigenous accessibility raised by students, professionals and activists alike

BY CARL WARREN

TORONTO (CUP) — Plans for an Arctic university were unveiled recently as leaders from eight nations met to discuss greater circumpolar collaboration.

Representatives from Canada, the United States, Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Russia, Sweden and Norway gathered for the maiden ministerial meeting of the Arctic Council in Iqaluit, North West Territories.

The two-year-old council was formed to devise ways for nations to cope with cultural, environmental and diplomatic challenges confronting the north.

Council members discussed the idea of a polar post-secondary school during the two-day conference earlier this month. They envision an institution that won't have a central campus but will instead take the shape of a combination of programs operating out of existing schools sprinkled across the north.

How the school will be funded has yet to be revealed by leaders, but they have hinted it will be financed through both public and private dollars.

"The Arctic university is still in the preliminary stages of planning," said Steven Outhouse, a spokesman for the Department of

Indian Affairs in Ottawa. "Talks haven't progressed enough to address the funding question yet."

But student leaders say the question of financing is important because it will determine whether

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the school will be accessible to indigenous people.

"In principle it sounds good," said Troy Sebastian, a member of the Canadian Federation of Students' aboriginal caucus. "But if the funding issue is not addressed properly then it [University of the Arctic] will come and go like any number of programs [in the north] over the past twenty years."

He adds that if the school is mainly subsidized by the corporate sector, then market-driven, high tuition rates may deter native students.

The Arctic Council thinks the

university can lend perspective to massive changes in the north brought about by globalization and the creation of the Nunavut territory.

The Nunavut Land Claim agreement, ratified by the Inuit in November 1992 and officially passed by parliament in 1993, will usher in the Nunavut government in April 1999.

Dark episodes in the north's history, such as the cold war and colonial domination, have long tainted circumpolar studies, necessitating a fresh

approach to the field that combines traditional and modern science.

"It will be wonderful to have an institution here," said lawyer and Iqaluit resident Paul Okalik.

"Instead of having research done by foreigners, done on our land and our people — who then

take the research and go south — we can have our own school."

First Nations people are playing a lead role in negotiations, and proponents of the university argue the most compelling reason for an Arctic school is because it will allow indigenous northerners to live and be educated in home localities.

"Say a person from Greenland wants to go to university," explained Vinnie

Karetak, a youth organizer with the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, a national political advocacy group for the Inuit Nation. "That student would have to fly to Denmark or Newfoundland to find the nearest school."

University-bound students from the north also confront staggering flight fares and cultural

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isolation. Okalik, who attended Carleton University in Ottawa, says he was forced to spend thousands of dollars on air expenses in order

to make the journey home between semesters.

"Fortunately, I knew people in Ottawa, but for other younger people, they want to stay [at home] and so their education is limited. They're bright young people — they just don't want to leave," said Okalik.


But some people are also concerned that the Arctic Council might overlook problems that may undermine its promotion of Arctic academia.

"Most native people are not receiving sufficient preparation services to ensure success at the post-secondary level," said Joyce Adams, a psychologist who has worked extensively with the James Bay Cree for 15 years.

In a region that's experiencing a youthful explosion — where more than half the population is under the age of 25 — nearly one out of two Inuit drop out of school before grade nine, and substance abuse and suicide levels are three times the national average.

"Basically, you have to look at these things holistically," said Karetak.

"Even if a child has a good university nearby, if they are not treated well at home or at high school, then things aren't going to get better."



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