

Essay

# Developing a Sustainable and Inclusive Northern Knowledge Ecosystem in Canada

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**Abstract:** A knowledge ecosystem is a collection of individuals and organizations who are involved in the creation, management and dissemination of knowledge, both in the form of research and lived experience and teaching. As is the case with ecosystems more generally, they thrive on variation and diversity, not only in the types of individuals and organizations involved but also in the roles that they play. For many decades, the northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada was dominated and controlled by Western scholarly approaches and researchers based in academic institutions outside the North. More recently, this research landscape has started to change, largely in response to the efforts of Indigenous peoples and northerners to realize greater self-determination and self-government. Not only have these changes led to the development of research and educational capacity in the North, but they have also changed the way that academic researchers engage in the research process. The keys to maintaining the future sustainability and health of the northern knowledge ecosystem will be encouraging diversity and balance in the research methodologies and approaches used to generate knowledge about the North and ensuring that the needs and priorities of northern and Indigenous peoples are recognized and addressed in the research process.

**Keywords:** knowledge ecosystem; north; research; education



**Citation:** Wilson, G.N. Developing a Sustainable and Inclusive Northern Knowledge Ecosystem in Canada. *Sustainability* **2021**, *13*, 9213. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su13169213>

Academic Editor: Tan Yigitcanlar

Received: 9 July 2021

Accepted: 13 August 2021

Published: 17 August 2021

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## 1. Introduction

In March 2018, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national association for Inuit in Canada, released the National Inuit Strategy on Research, a policy document that outlines a vision for the future of research in Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland in Canada [1]. It presents Inuit priorities for research conducted in their territories, including greater Inuit oversight and control over research funding and projects and the information generated by those projects, so that research benefits Inuit communities and regions. It also aims to build research capacity so that Inuit communities can lead and conduct research without having to rely on researchers based at southern post-secondary institutions and research organizations.

The National Inuit Strategy on Research is one example of how the northern knowledge ecosystem is changing and adapting to the new realities created by the efforts of Indigenous peoples to realize greater self-determination. In the circumpolar north, as in many other regions of the world, the knowledge ecosystem, which consists of the individuals and organizations who are involved in all aspects of knowledge production and dissemination, has been dominated by academic, state and corporate organizations and actors. Historically, research was conducted without the consent or input of northern and Indigenous peoples, often in ways that were inconsistent with their values and harmful and disruptive to their ways of life. Although much has changed over the last several decades, as Natan Obed, the President of ITK reminds us, “In this era of reconciliation, research governance bodies, procedures, and practices must be transformed to respect Inuit self-determination in research” [2].

The changes that are reshaping the northern research landscape are driven by both internal and external forces but are ultimately the product of the efforts of northerners and,

in particular, Indigenous northerners to exercise greater control over research conducted in the North. These trends are not only happening in Canada, but across the circumpolar north. Many in the academic community, especially the younger generation of academic researchers, support such changes and have taken steps in their own research to collaborate more extensively with northern and Indigenous communities in the research process through the co-production of research and community-based participatory research. Others have gone further by aligning their research with the cause of social justice and substantive political and economic change.

Rather than present a defined body of research, the purpose of this article is to reflect on the current and changing landscape of the northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada. In addition to outlining, in a very general manner, the main elements of this knowledge ecosystem, the article will consider the various roles that academic researchers and educators can play in ensuring the sustainability and inclusiveness of this ecosystem in the future. The northern knowledge ecosystem is complex and draws sustenance and inspiration from a variety of sources. As is the case with any ecosystem, each actor, large and small, contributes in some way to the sustainability of the whole. Sometimes, these contributions go unnoticed or are underappreciated or misunderstood, but they are, nonetheless, important to the ecosystem's future viability.

As a non-Indigenous scholar at a small, northern post-secondary institution, my perspectives on the northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada have been shaped by my experiences living and working in the Canadian provincial north and travelling throughout the Canadian Arctic and circumpolar north. They have also been informed by my research on Indigenous self-governance and politics in the Canadian and circumpolar north and by my involvement in several northern research and education associations. The views represented in this article, however, are my own and do not necessarily represent the opinions and perspectives of these associations.

This article is divided into two parts. Part one begins by considering the concept of a knowledge ecosystem and then reviews the contours of the northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada. Part two examines the opportunities and challenges confronting the northern knowledge ecosystem and speculates about the ways in which it could evolve in the future.

## 2. Northern Knowledge Ecosystem in Canada

Thomson defines a knowledge ecosystem as “the complex and many-faceted system of people, institutions, organizations, technologies and processes by which knowledge is created, interpreted, distributed, absorbed and utilized” [3]. The concept has been used in a variety of academic disciplines to describe the collection of individuals and organizations who are involved in the creation, management and dissemination of knowledge, both in the form of research and lived experience and teaching. As is the case with ecosystems more generally, knowledge ecosystems thrive on variation and diversity, not only in the types of individuals and organizations involved but also in the roles that they play in ensuring the sustainability of the ecosystem as a whole. As anthropogenic climate change has clearly demonstrated, the overwhelming dominance of one actor or force can have dire consequences for ecosystem sustainability. The most sustainable knowledge ecosystems draw strength from a variety of knowledge and perspectives that coexist in an open and transparent forum.

Knowledge ecosystems exist in many different contexts and settings but tend to be dominated by post-secondary institutions and independent research organizations in the public, nongovernmental and private sectors. In the past, universities and other post-secondary institutions have focused primarily on curiosity-driven research and teaching, but more recently, they have been actively involved in a “third mission” that mobilizes their considerable resources to address the pressing social and economic challenges facing society [4]. Regional development has become a common theme of academic research and teaching, especially in remote and peripheralized regions that typically lack knowledge infrastructure and research capacity [5]. In this and other respects, the experiences of

northern Canada and the circumpolar north are similar and relevant to those of other remote regions such as northern Australia and Amazonia [6].

The northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada and other parts of the circumpolar north is evolving in ways that suggest it is becoming more sustainable and diverse. For many decades, research and knowledge about the North was dominated and controlled by Western scholarly approaches and researchers based at academic institutions outside the North. This research was disseminated mainly through academic publications and reports that were inaccessible and not very useful to northern and Indigenous communities. Northern and Indigenous knowledge about the North, although known and used by people living in the North, rarely informed wider discussions about northern conditions and priorities, and government policies designed to address northern issues. Over the past several decades, however, the research landscape has started to change. Universities and colleges have been established in the North, providing opportunities for northerners to access post-secondary education without leaving the North. This trend has been supported and supplemented by online and remote programming; although the challenges of accessing the Internet in many remote, northern communities has limited the impact of such programming. In addition to opening the North to the world, northern post-secondary institutions focus their attention on the pressing issues and needs of the northern regions and communities they serve. For example, they were among the first post-secondary institutions to establish research and academic partnerships with northern and Indigenous communities and, in doing so, started to challenge the existing orthodoxies around research approaches and methodologies.

In certain respects, Canada has lagged behind other countries in the circumpolar north when it comes to nurturing the development of post-secondary institutions in the North. Countries such as Russia and Norway have invested heavily in educational infrastructure and programming in northern regions, establishing world-class institutions of higher learning in the Arctic. The educational landscape in Canada, however, has evolved over the last several decades, starting with the establishment of universities in the provincial norths (for example, the University of Northern British Columbia, University College of the North in Manitoba and Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue) and then expanding to the territorial north. The recent transition of Yukon College to Yukon University represents the first of a number of expected developments in post-secondary education in the Canadian territorial north [7]. The establishment of Yukon University was done in full consultation and partnership with Indigenous peoples in Yukon and was a response to a longstanding demand from Yukon First Nations, dating back to the early 1970s, for a university in the territory [7]. The post-secondary landscape in northern Canada is complemented and diversified by other educational institutions and opportunities such as the Dechinta “bush university”, a land-based educational initiative that is run by the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning and recently received CAD 13 million in federal funding over five years [8].

In Canada, the gradual expansion of post-secondary education in the North has also led to the establishment of northern research institutes whose primary role is to oversee research being conducted in particular region or territory by academic institutions and organizations and to encourage northern-led research projects. An example is the Aurora Research Institute in the Northwest Territories. In some cases, these institutes have developed research ethics principles and protocols, similar to those at southern post-secondary institutions, to monitor the research process and provide avenues for northern and Indigenous involvement throughout. Northern focused institutes are also based in “southern” institutions. These institutes facilitate the mobilization of significant research capacity at large post-secondary institutions in the interests of northern research. Some examples include Centre d’Études Nordiques at Université Laval in Québec City, UAlberta North at the University of Alberta in Edmonton and the Arctic Institute of North America at the University of Calgary. Some Indigenous communities and regions have established their own research institutes and ethics processes to provide oversight of and approval for

the research being conducted in their territories. Examples from Inuit Nunangat include the Nunatsiavut Research Centre, the Nunavik Research Centre and Inuit Qaujisarvingat (the Inuit Knowledge Centre), which is connected to ITK. For Indigenous governments and organizations, this represents an important and necessary step towards building critical research capacity and infrastructure, focusing attention on issues and topics that are important and meaningful to Indigenous communities, ensuring Indigenous control over the data generated by research and, ultimately, contributing to the self-determination of Indigenous peoples [2].

While researchers at post-secondary institutions outside the North still dominate research agendas and funding competitions, they are increasingly doing so in partnership with northern and Indigenous organizations and communities. Co-production and community-based participatory research have become regular and, in some cases, expected methodological approaches to conducting research in the North. Many academic researchers, especially early-career scholars, view research as a partnership with Indigenous rights-holders and northern stakeholders and invest time and energy in relationship-building prior to starting the research. Such investments often lead to research projects and agendas that respond to northern and Indigenous priorities.

Post-secondary institutions and other research organizations based outside the North have also supported northern development through research and pedagogical programming designed to strengthen the capacity of northern and Indigenous communities. One of many examples is the Community-Based Teacher Education Program, a partnership between the Faculty of Education at Memorial University, the Labrador Institute, the Nunatsiavut Government and other local organizations. The aim of the program is to focus on primary and elementary teacher education in a northern and Indigenous context in order to enhance Nunatsiavut's educational capacity [9]. In addition to reaching out to northern regions and communities, post-secondary institutions have also started to address longstanding and entrenched systems of colonization by reforming their internal structures and processes and engaging in processes of Indigenization as part of a broader effort to create a more inclusive academic environment that respects and values Indigenous ways of knowing and being [10].

The northern knowledge ecosystem is supported by a variety of organizations and agencies, including governments, philanthropic organizations and academic associations, which provide funding and other resources for research projects and initiatives. In Canada, a considerable amount of funding for northern research is channeled through arms-length government bodies such as the Tri-Council agencies: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC); Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC); the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR). In the past, these agencies have been accused of perpetuating exploitative and colonial research relationships; for example, individuals or organizations that are not based at a recognized post-secondary institution were not allowed lead research projects as Principal Investigators (PIs). In a recent statement, however, the SSHRC said that it is "committed to supporting and promoting research by and with Indigenous peoples. This commitment emphasizes the importance of Indigenous perspectives and knowledge systems to increase and expand our knowledge and understanding about human thought and behaviour in the past and present, as well as the future" [11]. This commitment is supported by other initiatives such as the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans—TCPS2 (2018) [12].

The Tri-Council agencies' funding mandate is broad and extends beyond the North. Other government agencies and programs, however, focus specifically on supporting northern research and knowledge production and dissemination. Polar Knowledge Canada, which falls under the jurisdiction of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, "is responsible for advancing Canada's knowledge of the Arctic, strengthening Canadian leadership in polar science and technology, and promoting the development and distribution of knowledge of other circumpolar regions, including Antarctica" [13]. It operates the Canadian High Arctic Research Station (CHARS), in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut,

an important part of Canada's Arctic research infrastructure. (Other important northern and Arctic research stations include the Churchill Northern Studies Centre in northern Manitoba and the Labrador Institute Research Station in Newfoundland and Labrador). Polar Knowledge Canada also houses the Northern Scientific Training Program (NSTP), a research funding program for students doing fieldwork in the North.

There are a number of Canadian academic associations focused on northern and Arctic research and education, including the Association of Canadian Universities for Northern Studies (ACUNS) and ArcticNet. Although the specific mandates and foci of these associations differ, they share a commitment to promoting research and knowledge creation in, about and with the North and play a critical role in connecting the various actors within the northern knowledge ecosystem. For over 40 years, ACUNS has served as a network for post-secondary institutions engaged in northern research and education. It has supported the next generation of northern researchers through its administration of grants and other funding opportunities for students and early career scholars and engaged in outreach to northern and Indigenous organizations to learn about and promote their research priorities [14,15]. It recently unveiled a new five-year strategic plan that is designed to align its goals more closely to the changing northern knowledge landscape [16]. Research and education in the North are further supported by philanthropic and charitable organizations, such as the Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation, the W. Garfield Weston Foundation and, most recently the Mastercard Foundation. In addition to targeting northern research in their funding portfolios, their activities also support the development of northern research infrastructure and encourage collaborations between organizations, decision makers, rights-holders and stakeholders. These organizations often work in partnership with academic associations, post-secondary institutions and government agencies.

We should also remember that the northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada does not exist in geographic isolation; it is connected to circumpolar and international networks of institutions, associations and organizations involved in northern research and scholarship. One of the clearest examples of such a network is the University of the Arctic (UArctic), a consortium of over 200 post-secondary institutions, research institutes and other organizations. The UArctic promotes education and research in an about the North by building and strengthening "collective resources and infrastructures that enable member institutions to better serve their constituents and regions" [17].

As with any ecosystem, the northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada is dominated by large entities which leave a significant footprint on the landscape. It is important to remember, however, that all of these entities are comprised of individuals who perform multiple roles and contribute different forms of knowledge. This includes local knowledge holders who have experience living and working in the North, as well as individuals who have more formal educational and research training. I want to focus on one group of individuals—post-secondary educators—as a means of dispelling some myths about their place within the northern knowledge ecosystem. In the past, educators, especially those based in the South, have been derided as agents of colonization or as esoteric "experts" holed up in their ivory towers and far removed from the issues and challenges facing northerners. Neither of these myths are true anymore. In fact, the vast majority of educators are dedicated to supporting and helping the North and its inhabitants. With the growth of northern post-secondary institutions and research organizations, some are residents of the North and are active in the life of the communities where they live. Those who live outside the North often spend significant amounts of time and effort building relationships with northern communities, conducting research that is beneficial to the North and volunteering for the organizations and associations discussed earlier, whose mandates are to promote research and education in the North and improve the lives of northerners.

One of the most important roles played by post-secondary educators and, indeed, one that is often overlooked is to inform post-secondary students and the broader public about the issues confronting the North. The vast majority of Canadians have never travelled to, let alone having lived or worked in, the North and have little or no knowledge about the

challenges and opportunities facing northern and Indigenous communities. The concerns of the North tend to get lost in the political and popular discourse, which is often dominated by the issues that are important in larger urban centers in the South. Post-secondary educators whose research focuses on the North are involved in educating students about the North and why it is important. It may seem like a very small and inconsequential act compared to the important work being done in the North by organizations and governments but raising awareness about the North among students, a group of people who will be the country's future political leaders, businesspeople, activists and citizens, will pay dividends in the years ahead. The impact of post-secondary educators also extends beyond academia. They are often called upon by the media to provide analysis of issues and events that are affecting the North. In doing so, they are able to reach a much wider audience of people who otherwise would not be aware of what is happening in the North. By engaging in public discourse about the North, post-secondary educators contribute to a broader and much-needed national dialogue about the changes that are taking place in this important region and the implications for Canada and Canadians [18].

### **3. The Evolving Northern Knowledge Ecosystem: Drivers, Challenges and Opportunities**

The changes we are seeing in the Canadian North with regards to research and education are being driven by a number of developments. Perhaps the most significant of these is connected to the efforts of Indigenous peoples to realize greater self-determination. At its heart, self-determination is about exercising control over one's destiny. Usually, we think of it in political or economic terms, but it could also easily be characterized in terms of regaining control over knowledge and knowledge production. International treaties such as the United Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and, in Canada, the recommendations and findings of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action provide the moral and legal impetus for changes in the relationship between Indigenous peoples and the State and broader society that will allow Indigenous peoples to self-determine. At the level of research and education, they provide general guidance on the appropriate behaviour and conduct of non-Indigenous researchers working with Indigenous communities. They have also informed other parts of the northern knowledge ecosystem by initiating changes in the ways that governments, organizations, and funders develop and administer their research support programs.

Over the past five decades, northern Indigenous peoples have negotiated and signed comprehensive land claims agreements (treaties) that have provided them with resources and the authority to exercise greater control over activities taking place in their territories. Although these agreements do not allow northern Indigenous peoples to exercise full sovereignty, they have been able to establish governance institutions that allow for greater regional and local autonomy. In doing so, many have established research infrastructure to oversee, encourage and conduct research that is important to their communities and regions. Researchers are now not only required to gain local approval for research projects well in advance of the commencement of the research, but they are also strongly encouraged to co-create research projects in close consultation with local communities and organizations. This new institutional framework is often supported and encouraged by research ethics boards at post-secondary institutions and by the major funding agencies as a precondition of their approval of research projects [19]. As a result of these changes, we have seen a profound shift in attitudes on the part of academic researchers from being in control of the research process from start to finish, to co-producing research with local partners and conducting research that meets the needs of communities.

The changes taking place in the northern knowledge ecosystem raise some interesting questions about its future purpose and direction. Since colonization, the research process has been controlled by outsiders to the North and curiosity-driven research based on Western methodological approaches and critical inquiry has been at the centre of academic endeavours. Although this research has produced valuable insights on the North, its

peoples and environments, in some cases, it has been conducted in ways that have been disrespectful and even harmful to northerners. The changes outlined above have started to ensure that such research practices do not continue; however, we also need to be careful that the pendulum does not swing too far to the other end of the spectrum, where research is being conducted purely to serve the needs and expectations of a particular group or organization. As Alcantara, Lalonde and Wilson have argued:

Academic researchers walk a fine line between getting to know the communities and regions they study (and supporting those communities and regions by trying to understand and reflect on their issues and problems) and maintaining a sufficient distance from those communities so that they can preserve a level of autonomy and reflection that is important to producing diverse and useful knowledge [20].

Balancing community-based and community-driven research with the academic freedom to pursue curiosity-driven research will be a difficult and increasingly contentious task in the future [19]. There is both room and a need for both types of research. Community-based research provides an important local perspective and involvement in the research process and works well for projects that aim to address or bring attention to local needs or issues. It is often imbued with a sense of social justice that seeks to shed light on and address the historical injustices suffered by Indigenous and northern communities at the hands of the settler state and its agents. Other forms of research, however, might be better suited to western-based methodological approaches; for example, comparative studies that are truly circumpolar in scope and compare and contrast developments in different regions of the Arctic, thereby yielding important information and insights for both communities and researchers. Such research can reveal important observations on a range of topics affecting northern communities and peoples, as well as innovative solutions to similar problems that have been experienced in other jurisdictions. In the future, we are likely to see research that employs elements of both western and Indigenous approaches. However, to do so, “some type of ‘translation bridge’ is needed to narrow epistemological gaps and to recognise and respect the distinctiveness, context, and origins of [Indigenous] knowledge when used alongside Western science” [19].

The northern knowledge ecosystem is home to researchers from a variety of disciplines, including those in the natural and physical sciences, social sciences, health sciences and humanities. For many years, the natural and physical sciences have dominated research in the North, both in terms of the number of research projects and the amount of research funding. In certain respects, this is understandable, given the fact that research projects in these disciplines usually require more expensive equipment and travel to remote locations far away from communities. The imbalance in focus and funding, however, has been recognized by academic associations such as ACUNS, as well as northern organizations such as ITK which are trying to build research capacity and use research as a means to address some of the pressing socioeconomic issues facing people living in northern communities [1,14,15]. As the National Inuit Strategy on Research has noted: “The current investments in Inuit Nunangat research reflect a biological-physical science research bias that diminishes the prominence and attention given to other Inuit research priorities, such as health and social science” [1].

Addressing the myriad socioeconomic challenges facing northern and Indigenous communities will require insights from a variety of experts, including people working for non-governmental and community organizations in the North, governments at all levels and academics trained in the social and health sciences and humanities. With the increasing involvement of Indigenous and northern communities and organizations in the research process, there will not only be a need to refocus research on the pressing social, economic and political issues facing the North, but also to break down the silos that exist between the different disciplines. In the academic world, we are already seeing this shift taking place, with many research projects now incorporating interdisciplinary approaches that include the natural scientists and social scientists. However, as is the case with the involvement of Indigenous peoples in the research process, it is critical that such collaboration occurs

from the outset of the project, rather than as an afterthought once the project is designed and underway.

#### 4. Conclusions

The northern knowledge ecosystem in Canada is an incredibly complex and organic entity that has evolved over time to include many different actors. It consists of a variety of organizations and individuals, often with different agendas and perspectives on the research process, but with a general interest in promoting the creation and dissemination of knowledge about the North. While it has been historically dominated by southern-based academics and academic institutions, in the last couple of decades, this knowledge ecosystem has become more diverse and complicated, largely due to the political and social changes taking place in the North and the resulting demands from northern and Indigenous organizations and peoples for greater involvement in and control over research and education. Generally speaking, academics have responded to these calls by modifying their research methodologies to recognize northern and Indigenous demands for more inclusive and respectful research. Some may feel that the pace of change is too slow or not sweeping enough, but for those who have watched the development of the northern knowledge ecosystem over the last decade or so, it is clear that important changes have occurred and that a new equilibrium is emerging which values and integrates non-Western perspectives, alongside and in partnership with Western research approaches and emphasizes interdisciplinary and cross disciplinary research. Such diversity is key to the future sustainability of the northern knowledge ecosystem, but more work needs to be done to build the “translation bridge” between different research approaches. The academic community must continue to work with northern, and Indigenous organizations and peoples to ensure that their needs and priorities are reflected in the research process and outcomes.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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