

The Importance of Legal Education and Inter-disciplinary Collaboration for the Future of Northern Cooperation

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There are different reasons why people seek legal education. In the context of the Circumpolar North, the question of education in general and legal education in particular becomes of the utmost significance because of a number of factors. Each Arctic region encounters special educational needs that are addressed within domestic and international frameworks (e.g., the experience of the University of the Arctic). Education is seen by many Northerners and their governments as a key priority in tackling many existing challenges of Northern administration, governance, and the building of local human capital that could address and understand Northern issues at first hand. Thus, it is not incidental that in the process of political evolution and further development many Arctic regions focused on efforts to raise a highly educated local human power that could replace outside advisers. For example, this process can be well observed in the development of Greenland which currently sees education as the ultimate pre-condition for further independence from Denmark;¹ or in Nunavut, where challenges of the educational system have been seriously criticized.² However, some efforts have been made to make the existing system inclusive of the Inuit traditional values and knowledge. In many Arctic areas the improvement of educational opportunities and the increasing of the educational level among all local residents is the pressing matter. In that regard, the importance of legal education cannot be discarded.

There are several examples where indigenous representatives sought legal education to help their communities address injustices and have a voice among Western trained legal professionals. In some cases, to increase indigenous representation in legal profession special affirmative action programs were introduced (e.g., law schools in Canada). However, there is still a challenge of having locally trained indigenous lawyers in the North. Presently, Greenland experiences a shortage of Greenlandic lawyers who would be able to communicate in their native language. In Nunavut the shortage of indigenous lawyers was partially remedied with the completion in 2005 of the Akitsiraq law school program which produced nine Inuit graduates trained with some consideration of their traditional knowledge in the law school curriculum.³ It still remains to be seen how many of those graduates will end up practicing law in the territory. In

the Russian Federation representatives of indigenous peoples are able to obtain legal education albeit mainly according to the standards of the dominant legal system. Another challenge has to do with the access to legal education and knowledge. Quite often concerns are raised that aside from political activists or leaders of indigenous organizations in the North, many indigenous peoples experience difficulties in dealing with the industry, investors and other activities that affect their lands or intellectual property rights. One solution to this challenge is to have more indigenous lawyers who could bridge cultural gaps and be proactive in representing indigenous interests and advancing indigenous rights.

It should be emphasized, however, that with regards to the prospects of Northern collaboration and inter-disciplinary research, legal education is of vital importance to all stakeholders interested in Arctic developments. In other words, it is not just an issue for Northern indigenous communities. If one looks at the law school curricula of different educational legal institutions and textbooks for various law courses, it becomes clear that for quite some time the Arctic perspective was excluded or ignored. To deal with this gap the Masters program in Polar Law studies was started in 2008 at the Department of law, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Akureyri, Iceland.⁴ This program is the first of its kind in the world as it provides a unique focus on legal issues in both Poles: the Arctic and the Antarctic. The program is designed for lawyers and representatives of the other social sciences and humanities. The focus on an inter-disciplinary approach and research broadens the educational opportunities for international candidates who wish to become experts in legal developments in the Polar Regions and consequently bring this knowledge and voice within Arctic and non-Arctic States, Northern and Southern communities, and to the organizations and actors that form the pillars of cooperation within the Arctic and internationally. The efficient and meaningful Northern cooperation is not feasible without addressing legal issues which are becoming more and more relevant to the political, economic, social and environmental discourse in the North. It can be concluded that the inclusion of a legal angle to ongoing inter-disciplinary research in the Arctic and in the focus on Polar law issues in the educational ventures are crucial for strategic planning and further developments of the Northern cooperation.

¹ Allagui S. (2008). Greenland sees education as key to independence. Agence France Presse. November 29.

² Berger, T. (2006). Nunavut Land Claims Agreement Implementation Contract Negotiations for the Second Planning Period 2003-2013. Conciliator's Final Report. March 1.

³ Loukacheva, N. (2007) *The Arctic Promise: Legal and Political Autonomy of Greenland and Nunavut*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

⁴ For details about this program see: www.polarlaw.is