

## What is Circumpolar Studies?

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By definition, Circumpolar Studies is an interdisciplinary program that explores the global Arctic region from a number of different disciplinary perspectives including social and natural sciences and cultural studies. It brings together scholarly perspectives from educators and researchers, practitioners and Indigenous knowledge holders who live and work throughout the circumpolar region. The result is an interdisciplinary and comprehensive exploration of lands and environments, peoples and places, cultures and languages and political and economic systems. Using this holistic approach, we come to understand how the circumpolar region is connected by common experiences, environments and identities.

Rather than promote abstract understandings of the North, contemporary curriculum strives to see the circumpolar region from the perspective of its inhabitants and their experience. Foundational interdisciplinary curriculum develops an appreciation about the connections between people and place, the impact of globalization and colonialism on Indigenous lands and people, the economic and security challenges now facing the North as a result of climate change and the interplay between Indigenous knowledge and Western science. This rich and situated knowledge breaks down disciplinary barriers and invites researchers to understand the North as a unique place which is both lived in and undergoing rapid change.

Circumpolar Studies is therefore an holistic and interdisciplinary approach to the entirety of the northernmost circumpolar region, but in particular the area traditionally covered by the designation "Arctic" and "Subarctic". More than a climate zone or a fixed geographical location, this region or region or regions includes the northernmost territories of seven countries: Canada, Finland, Denmark (including Greenland and the Faroe Islands, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States (Alaska). It also includes Iceland, which lies entirely within the Arctic and sub-Arctic region. The circumpolar North is a place of many peoples and environments, and has a long a rich history. In many areas decolonization of Indigenous lands are underway, giving rise to innovation in governance and land use. The circumpolar region also faces a number of challenges, including climate change, which is has already begun to reshape human and physical geographies of the region; globalization, which has reconfigured traditional economies and trade pattern; and new geopolitical agendas, which have sparked the intensification of global interest in asserting state power and influence and control of economic exploitation of the region.

Circumpolar Studies has been a longstanding component of UArctic programming. More than 'northern studies', the UArctic network *promotes* a multidisciplinary approach to learning about the Circumpolar North. Core concerns are *understanding its lands, seas and environments; peoples and cultures; and the contemporary issues facing the region* ( LINK: UArctic . <https://education.uarctic.org/circumpolar-north/>). The UArctic network has devised a core curriculum based upon this tripartite framework, that is currently used by dozens of member institutions worldwide (LINK) . This undergraduate curriculum is comprehensive and interdisciplinary, and was designed to benefit students at all its member institutions.

Today this LINK: core curriculum is still available and widely used. Some institutions have updated materials to incorporate new themes, new challenges and new information. In other cases institutions have developed their own course materials. LINK: *They offer a wide variety of northern-relevant programs and courses that you can discover through the Study Catalogue*. The latter cover a wide variety of specific and cross-cutting themes including: Indigenous peoples, their cultures, languages and political

aspirations; climate change and its impacts; natural resources and extractive industry economies; international relations and geo-politics; and ecology, northern ecosystems and biology.

In general the circumpolar studies curriculum supports four general learning outcomes. These are to:

- ❖ define the Circumpolar North from multiple perspectives and to understand its complexity
- ❖ understand the Arctic and a homeland and to demonstrate a basic familiarity with the region's physical and human geography, its cultures, peoples, communities and ways of life
- ❖ understand the drivers of international relations and domestic politics in the Arctic
- ❖ appreciate the contemporary landscape of governance in the Arctic

There are four general program goals within the current UArctic Circumpolar Studies core curriculum (APPENDIX A). These may be useful in developing a broader curriculum map and for building a far-ranging and interrelated program curriculum.

### **Building A Circumpolar Studies Course**

The following guide is designed to help member institutions in the development or redevelopment of circumpolar studies curriculum. It provides a series of guidelines to developing, redesigning and enhancing undergraduate curriculum and pedagogy to support expansion of circumpolar. Rather than a series of criterion to be addressed, we provide a checklist and commentary for institutions to develop a user friendly curriculum that addresses the circumpolar region in all its facets, and that facilitates meaningful learning outcomes.

This guide is less concerned with identifying specific topics and criteria that it is with the way in which circumpolar studies curriculum should be designed to meet existing UArctic curriculum goals for course development that meets circumpolar studies core curriculum standards. While not all courses will be part of the core curriculum currently delivered by UArctic member institutions across the region, the goal is to provide guidelines which continue the concept of circumpolar studies as envisioned in that core curriculum. UArctic offers several pathways by which you can connect your curriculum with other member institutions and larger learning projects. This includes membership in the Laera Institute for Circumpolar Studies, through strategic partnerships with other Arctic institutions who offer a circumpolar studies curriculum, or through the endorsement process which leads to placement of your program in the Arctic Study Catalogue.

#### **Getting started:**

Before beginning to address ideas about content, you should:

- ❖ Think about course and how it maps to a larger body of knowledge. What is your area of focus? Where does it fit within the three general themes of circumpolar studies – land and environment, people and cultures, contemporary issues and socio-economic themes. How will you incorporate different disciplinary and epistemological perspectives and world views?
- ❖ Identify the themes and comparative strategies of the course. How will you make use of the comparative method at different scales. How will you make use of the comparative method in circumpolar North in meaningful ways that will allow students to develop an expanded view of the work around them.
- ❖ How will you bring in Indigenous voices and co-develop and consult with indigenous Peoples in developing course curriculum.

#### **Mapping out the course: Some guidelines to content.**

The first issue to address is where does your course fit in the tripartite Circumpolar studies thematic framework of lands and environment, Peoples and cultures, and contemporary issues. Circumpolar studies is a broad and multidisciplinary field. Nonetheless, there are components of curriculum that are essential to maintaining its distinctive approach and curriculum. All curriculum should *addresses at least one* of these three central issues from a multidisciplinary perspective and include Indigenous content and perspective.

1. **Lands and environments:** The geography, geology, and fauna and flora of the circumpolar region are distinctive. Whether you choose to focus on climate, vegetation, or other variables, there are clear circumpolar trends in distribution, and these tend to roughly coincide with the region defined in Figure 1.

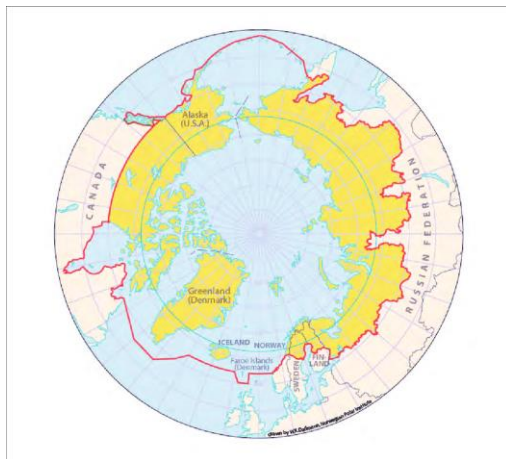


Figure 1

There are also well-defined areas zones of continuous and discontinuous permafrost, periglacial features and hydrological and maritime processes that roughly correspond to this unique area of the world. Solar radiation and the circulation patterns of air and water also contribute to defining this region.

This thematic focus recognizes that the landscapes of the Circumpolar North have been shaped by the interplay of physical, chemical, and biological processes operating over many millions of years. Many of the physical features and processes found in the Circumpolar North are unique to this part of the earth. The flora and fauna of the northern regions are adapted to the region's extreme and finely balanced environments. The major factors involved in the development of northern landscapes and the biology of circumpolar ecosystems include the large seasonal variations in solar energy throughout the year; the climate, including cold temperatures and low precipitation; the presence or absence of water in its various phases (gas, liquid or solid) and the dynamics and influence of water on northern landscapes and terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems; and the emergence of the region from the last Ice Age. It is important to understand how these processes work to define both the physical and human geography of the region. Integral to this understanding is the impact of climate change, and the work of polar scientists as they work to define and predict the way in which a warming circumpolar region might emerge in the future.

Because the circumpolar region is vast, and its physical and human geography varied, it is important to undertake comparative analysis of the entire region. Underlying geological processes define landforms which glacial and post-glacial epochs have altered into comparative distinctive

landscapes. Combined with variations in latitude, solar radiation, climate, ecological relationships and other factors, the circumpolar region needs to be understood from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. Comparative, multidisciplinary analysis of regions and sub-regions is essential. Continental, sub-continental and sub-regional case studies work well in this regard. There are also numerous studies of the impact to be found in the work of AMAP, ACIA and other organizations. Here it is essential to ensure that your course reflects define circumpolar at a number of scales. Using a number of case studies to reflect local contexts, and reflect comparative understandings. You will see that in our checklist we recommend that you maintain a minimum of three regional comparisons in any scenario or course module to ensure breadth.

A related point is that one of the key principles of circumpolar studies from the perspective of the UArctic network and its member institutions is, however, the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and perspectives within circumpolar curriculum. Scientists are not the only circumpolar knowledge-holders. It is important to include the perspectives and voices of Indigenous Peoples in meaningful ways. Traditional knowledge is the distilled wisdom of centuries of Indigenous learning on the land. Each Indigenous Peoples has their own understanding of their relationship to the land, and the environments which they encounter. Incorporating Indigenous voices in the analysis of environment, and changing environment, is essential to understanding circumpolar land and environment. Curriculum needs to make room for diverse epistemological and world views on environments and environmental relationships, and to incorporate these within each course and module.

*Key learning outcomes:*

Any course that focuses on the lands and environments of the circumpolar world should aim to develop the following skills and awareness in students who successfully complete the course. This includes the ability to

- ❖ compare the present biophysical conditions in different parts of the North.
  - ❖ explain the importance of physical processes underlying the development of northern tectonics, volcanism and mountain building.
  - ❖ summarize in general terms the unique environmental conditions that govern life in the Circumpolar North.
  - ❖ articulate how plants and animals adapt to changing conditions in the North.
  - ❖ discuss some of the ways climate change is affecting the Circumpolar North and its Indigenous populations and traditional societies.
2. **People and Culture:** There are many Indigenous Peoples living within the circumpolar region, as well as a diverse non-Indigenous population. There are also complex gender and demographic relationships which influence lifestyle, cultural relationships and language. Figure 2 shows the diversity of Indigenous populations in the circumpolar region.



Figure 2

Northern cultures and subsistence economies have been shaped by their landscapes, drawing on the resources of boreal forest, tundra, or coastal environments, and living in sustainable communities that relied largely on hunting, gathering, fishing, and herding. explores traditional and formal economies of the circumpolar region. Global demand for the vast renewable and non-renewable resources in the North, including wildlife, fisheries and oceans, and minerals, and oil and gas, plays a significant role in today's northern economies and has transformed northern lives since the time of self-sufficient, subsistence lifestyles. A focus on people and cultures of the circumpolar region should include a broad-ranging and interdisciplinary examination of historical and contemporary experiences. With recognition of the historical and ongoing colonial relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples within the circumpolar region, an understanding of culture, language and historical legacy is central to the process of decolonization. Governments

and other social agencies reorganized northern peoples for their ideological or organizational convenience. This included centralization by which government agencies induced (semi-)nomadic people to settle. It is important to explore the process throughout the circumpolar world, and to discuss various cases of imposed relocations and different reasons for which Indigenous Peoples were moved. This should include the collectivization processes in Soviet Russia, relocations in Canada and Greenland, and displacement in the Nordic states.

The history of each circumpolar region is therefore different. This should be addressed in comparative fashion, with similarities in experience also noted, and general trends identified. Today North America which has well-established Indigenous land claims, which Russia, which does not, is still unique and its Indigenous and traditional territories still important to understand.

Overall, Indigenous Peoples cultures have been remarkably resilient in many ways, although they have faced similar challenges stemming from globalization, residential schools, and exclusion from their traditional territory. There are similar stories of cultural loss, but also stories of resistance and resilience. These should be documented on a region-by-region basis.

It is also important to remember that Indigenous voices are central to the telling of their own story. This includes performance and arts, traditional understandings and world views, written and oral accounts, and learning resources which are written by cultural authorities within Indigenous communities. Curriculum should include the perspective of at least three distinctive Indigenous groups within the circumpolar region, preferably those with different traditional economies and histories. Ideally, your course will include a variety of voices in your learning resources, including interviews, articles, books and videos by indigenous peoples, experts in thematic areas, northern residents, etc. Co-creation of Indigenous history, culture and language, and traditional knowledge components of the course with Indigenous partners is highly recommended.

#### *Learning outcomes:*

Any course that focuses on the people and culture of the circumpolar world should aim to develop the following skills and awareness in students who successfully complete the course. This includes the ability to

- ❖ distinguish among the different cultures and ethnicities of peoples from the Circumpolar North.
- ❖ Articulate the circumstances surrounding the historical arrivals of non-indigenous people living in the North.
- ❖ identify similarities and differences among the cultural groups in the Circumpolar North.
- ❖ portray non-indigenous contemporary culture in the North

### **3. Contemporary issues**

A variety of interrelated socio-economic and governance conditions are central to understanding the circumpolar world. Changing environments, decolonization, resilient Indigenous cultures and globalization have all contributed to the landscape of contemporary circumpolar issues. The circumpolar North is today an exceptional area in which both climate change and environmental shifts; a corresponding opportunity for a more accessible North; the potential for greater economic development of stemming from resource extraction; the development of corresponding shipping and related infrastructure; and decolonization and the development of new modes of governance have created new economic, social, and geopolitical/ security relationships. Northern cultures and subsistence economies have been shaped by their landscapes, drawing on the resources of boreal forest tundra, or coastal environments, and living in sustainable communities that relied largely on

hunting, gathering, fishing, and herding. At the same time, global demand for the vast renewable and non-renewable resources in the North, including wildlife, fisheries and oceans, and minerals, and oil and gas, plays a significant role in today's northern economies and has transformed northern lives since the time of self-sufficient, subsistence lifestyles.

An understanding of the contemporary North requires a clear understanding of the historical legacies of exploration, colonization, industrialization, and globalization throughout the North. These processes have affected different areas unevenly, and comparative analysis is clearly important in this regard. One critical area of focus is on understanding the 'three-pillars' model of the Arctic economy. Using this model as a framework, it is possible to examine how economic structures and activities vary across Arctic region, particularly at the scale of North America, Russia and the Nordic countries, and the basis of persistent socio-economic inequalities in Arctic communities. At the same time, economic development cannot be understood outside of its relationship to traditional Arctic economies, that is to say the informal economies that originally existed in the Arctic before colonialization, and which have persisted through the colonial period until today. These economies provide the material basis for preservation of Indigenous society and culture in the Arctic, continue to interact with the formal industrialized economy. Such issues also interact with the question of economic sustainability in the Arctic.

An interrelated concept is the exploration of political systems of the Circumpolar North and how they operate to shape development and international cooperation. After a long history of colonization and assimilation, over the past few decades the Arctic states s have developed some innovative examples of governance, often involving Indigenous self-government.

This includes international and collaborative organizations combining state, community, and intergovernmental institutions, such as the Arctic Council and the Barents-Euro Arctic Region; to nongovernmental organizations, such as the Circumpolar Conservation Union, the University of the Arctic, and the Northern Forum.

*Key learning outcomes:*

Any course that focuses on the people and culture of the circumpolar world should aim to develop the following skills and awareness in students who successfully complete the course. This includes the ability to:

- ❖ analyze how national governance contributes to economic growth in the Circumpolar North in comparison with other regions' and nations' economies
- ❖ compare and contrast individual Northern regions in terms of GDP, wellbeing and population dynamics
- ❖ describe how Northern Indigenous peoples combine traditional livelihoods with participation in the market economy
- ❖ illustrate how sustainable management of renewable and non-renewable resources might benefit Northern communities in balance with traditional culture and practice
- ❖ evaluate the effects of climate change on Northern sustainable development

### **Learning Resources:**

It is strongly advised that circumpolar studies courses use learning resources that are both scholarly and accessible. There are a number of open educational resources suitable for use in the circumpolar region. Publications compiled by Arctic Council working groups (AMAP, ACIA, PAME, CAFF) for example, are reliable and accurate, and generally address cutting edge themes. In addition, however, course developers should search for and include a variety of voices in your learning resources, including interviews, articles, books and videos by indigenous peoples, experts in thematic areas, northern

residents, etc. There are a number of organizations and agencies which are useful sources for such information, including the Arctic Portal, the Arctic Council, the Inuit Circumpolar Council, the Aleut International Association, the Arctic Athabaskan Council, the Gwich'in Council International, the Inuit Circumpolar Council (ICC), the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North (RAIPON), and the Sami Council. Journals such as Polar Record, Polar Journal and Polar Geography also contain a diverse series of articles regarding circumpolar themes. Eye of the Arctic, the Arctic Institute and XXX also provide regular coverage of Arctic affairs. For those who are able to access them, compiled bibliographies such as the Oxford Arctic Bibliographies may also be useful.

The resource kits on the Circumpolar Curriculum website provide a starting point for those interested in building a circumpolar curriculum around the tripartite framework identified earlier.