UArctic

Founding aims and future signals

UArctic's theory of change as seen by a selection of its founders



Stephen Heal and Laura Ditto

Stephen Heal, Senior Affiliated Researcher, Arctic Centre, University of Lapland, Finland, and member of UArctic President's Cabinet. Laura Ditto is a writer with the UArctic Foundation (US), based at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, Alaska, USA.

Looking North from cairn at Keiservarden, Bodø, Norway | Photo credit: Stephen Heal

UArctic

Publication information

Founding aims and future signals: UArctic's theory of change as seen by its founders

Authors	Stephen Heal and Laura Ditto
Publication year	2026
Suggested citation	Heal, S. and Ditto, L. (2026) *Founding aims and future signals: UArctic's theory of change as seen by its founders*. UArctic Ry.
ISBN	
DOI	10.5281/zenodo.23465221

Contributing Founders

Outi Snellman

Secretary General, UArctic, and Head of the UArctic International Secretariat, University of Lapland, Finland. A UArctic founder, she has provided institutional continuity from the Circumpolar Universities Association through UArctic's development.

Terry V Callaghan CMG

Professor of Arctic Ecology, School of Biosciences, University of Sheffield, UK. A UArctic founder, he is an Arctic ecologist whose work has centred on international scientific collaboration, ecosystem change and long-term research networks.

Leslie King

Professor in Environment and Sustainability, Royal Roads University, Canada. A UArctic founder, she has led environmental education and sustainability programmes and worked extensively with Indigenous and local communities.

Paul Reichardt

Professor of Chemistry and Provost Emeritus, University of Alaska Fairbanks, USA. A UArctic founder and former UAF provost, he contributed a research-university and higher-education leadership perspective to UArctic's early development.

Jón Haukur Ingimundarson

Senior Scientist, Stefansson Arctic Institute, and Associate Professor of Anthropology and Arctic Studies, University of Akureyri, Iceland. A UArctic founder, he chaired the development team for the early Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies.

Rune Rydén

UArctic Sage and former Member of the Swedish Parliament; affiliated at UArctic's founding with the Scandinavian Seminar Group, Sweden/USA. A UArctic founder, he represented Scandinavian Seminar and served for many years in UArctic governance and membership roles.

Acknowledgements

The Founders' Scholars programme is funded by all of the generous donors to The Heal Fund set up in honour of the founders of UArctic. The fund seeks to carry forward the aims and values of the founders of UArctic to future generations. We would like to acknowledge Isabelle Guissard, UArctic Vice President Mobility and Morgan Dulian, UArctic Executive Director of Development and Lars Kullerud, UArctic President for their help and support in establishing the Founders' Scholars programme

Abstract

This paper examines the founding aims of the University of the Arctic (UArctic) through interviews with selected founders: Outi Snellman, Terry Callaghan, Leslie King, Paul Reichardt, Jón Haukur Ingimundarson and Rune Rydén. It combines retrospective interview evidence with a constrained choice exercise in which interviewees advised on the selection of early-career “Founders’ Scholars” from a shortlist of eleven PhD students and early-career researchers accepted to present at the 2026 UArctic Congress in Tórshavn, Faroe Islands.

This paper asks what these accounts and choices reveal about UArctic’s implied theory of change. The evidence suggests three substantive founding aims: strengthening northern regional development and community viability; enhancing research, education and thematic collaboration across the circumpolar region; and embedding Indigenous participation, including in governance of UArctic and its programmes. These aims were pursued through mobility, shared curriculum, digital and field-based learning, thematic networks, membership structures and convening capacity. The Founders’ Scholars exercise adds a distinctive empirical device: by asking founders to select people and projects, it reveals which contemporary activities they see as carriers of founding values. Their choices favour rural and digital education, water security and permafrost, emergency care in remote communities, Indigenous futures, community justice, social choice, child health inequality and place-based learning. The paper argues that these choices recast the founding spirit for the present: UArctic should remain pan-Arctic, educationally innovative, practically useful, attentive to Indigenous self-determination and capable of sustaining relationships across distance and geopolitical rupture.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction 6

2. Methodological approach 7

3. UArctic’s founding goals as recalled by interviewees 8

4. Enabling mechanisms: how UArctic was expected to work 9

5. The Founders’ Scholars exercise as values-in-action 11

6. What the choices reveal about founding aims 13

7. Inaugural Founders' Scholars awarded

8. Reconstructing UArctic’s theory of change 16

9. Signals for current and future UArctic leadership 18

10. Methodological reflection 19

11. Conclusion 20

Primary sources 21

Annotated bibliography and methodological references 22

1. Introduction

UArctic was first imagined at a meeting of the Arctic Council's Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme (AMAP) in 1997. British ecologist Bill Heal was in conversation with Lars-Erik Liljelund, then vice-chair of AMAP, and Lars Otto Reisersen, AMAP's secretary general. Bill is reported to have said "What we need is a university for the Arctic". The Canadian SAO, then Chair of the Arctic Council asked Bill and Outi Snellman, Secretary General of the Circumpolar Universities Association to explore the idea through a feasibility study and development plan that led in 1998 to the Iqaluit declaration by the Arctic Council calling for "the establishment of a university of the Arctic, a university without walls...". UArctic's official launch took place in Rovaniemi in 2001. UArctic was founded as a network of universities and colleges rather than as a conventional campus-based institution. According to analysis of its founding documents, its central ambition was to create educational, research and relational infrastructure across a region divided by distance, language, national borders, institutional asymmetry and uneven access to higher education. Because of this networked form, UArctic's impact is unlikely to be captured fully through conventional single-institution metrics. Its most important effects may lie in mobility, shared identity, institutional trust, student pathways, co-created knowledge, thematic networks and the ability to connect people across a fragmented circumpolar space.

This paper uses founder interviews to examine UArctic's founding goals and implied theory of change. It draws on interviews and conversations with Outi Snellman, Terry Callaghan, Leslie King, Paul Reichardt, Jón Haukur Ingimundarson and Rune Rydén, conducted in 2025 and 2026, approximately 25 years after UArctic's founding. The interviewees represent different strands of UArctic's founding ecosystem: formal institutional leadership and continuity; scientific cooperation; applied sustainability education; values-based governance and Indigenous education; northern institutional capacity; curriculum-building; mobility, exchange and governance practice.



Bill Heal: "What we need is a University for the Arctic"

Photo Credit: Stephen Heal

The paper has two linked purposes. First, it reconstructs the founding goals as recalled and interpreted by those involved in, or close to, UArctic's early formation. Second, it analyses a practical selection exercise in which most interviewees reviewed a shortlist of eleven possible Founders' Scholars (UArctic Founders Scholar shortlist, April 2026). The exercise was not merely symbolic: selected scholars were to receive financial support from the Heal Founders Fund to attend the UArctic Congress, meet founders and be recognised as carriers of founding values. The exercise therefore functions as a values-in-action method: it asks founders not only what they believe UArctic stood for, but which kinds of contemporary work they would choose to represent that legacy.

This research is informed by a preliminary review of 17 founding-period documents, which identified three substantive founding aims and three principal enabling mechanisms. The documentary review is used here as a baseline for interpreting the interviews, rather than as a full archival analysis.

2. Methodological approach

The research design combines retrospective qualitative interviewing with a choice-anchored elicitation exercise. The interviews were semi-structured and asked participants to reflect on UArctic's founding goals, achievements, continuing values and future needs. Interpretive judgements and quotes were subsequently cross-checked with the founders in follow-up exchanges.

The founding documents identified an initial set of themes, which were then tested and interpreted through founder interviews and the Founders' Scholars choice exercise.

In five of the six cases, the interviews also included discussion of a redacted shortlist of eleven PhD students and early-career researchers accepted to present at the UArctic Congress 2026. Interviewees received the shortlist in advance and were asked to rank, group or identify the candidates they would support as Founders' Scholars, and to explain why.

The exercise was not a formal discrete choice experiment, nor was it a full Q-methodology study. It is closer to a qualitative ranking, vignette or card-sort approach, using real candidate profiles rather than hypothetical scenarios. Its methodological value lies in making abstract founding values concrete. Rather than asking only "what values matter?", the exercise asked "which people and projects should carry those values forward?" This reduced the risk of purely rhetorical answers and revealed trade-offs among values such as Indigenous representation, circumpolarity, educational innovation, scientific relevance, need, equity, career stage and geographical distribution.

The approach is consistent with theory-based evaluation and theory-of-change methods, where the aim is to reconstruct the causal assumptions through which an intervention is expected to generate outcomes. Theory-based evaluation emphasises the assumptions linking activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts, rather than relying only on direct output measurement. Weiss's early work remains relevant because UArctic's intended impacts include diffuse outcomes such as identity, collaboration and social capital rather than easily counted outputs. Rogers's work on programme theory is also relevant because UArctic is a complex intervention with multiple actors, feedback loops and emergent outcomes. Mayne's contribution analysis supports careful causal language: UArctic is unlikely to be the sole cause of observed changes and is better understood as a contributory cause within a wider Arctic institutional ecosystem (Weiss, 1995; Rogers, 2008; Mayne, 2012).

The choice exercise is also supported by qualitative work on vignettes, Q-methodology and card-sorting. Vignettes can elicit normative judgements in concrete situations, while Q-methodology and card-sorting can reveal how participants organise priorities, subjectivities and choices. Finch describes vignettes as useful for eliciting normative data; Watts and Stenner describe Q-methodology as a way to capture subjective viewpoints; and recent qualitative card-sort literature shows that sorting and ranking tasks can make abstract concepts tangible within interviews (Finch, 1987; Barter and Renold, 1999; Watts and Stenner, 2012; Brent et al., 2021; Conrad and Tucker, 2019).

The evidence has limitations. The sample is purposive and small. All interviewees were formally recognised as UArctic founders and were both participants in, and witnesses to, the founding ecosystem. Interview transcripts were used except for Outi Snellman's interview which is based on interpreted notes and follow-up discussion rather than a transcript. The author's role as initiator of the UArctic Heal Founders Fund helped gain access to the founders, whilst the design of the choice exercise and the follow-up cross-checks help ensure that outcomes and interpretations reflect those of the founders interviewed. The candidate profiles were intentionally short, with names, ages and institutions redacted. This design widened the choice set and sought to reduce institutional and gender bias, but it also limited the founders' ability to assess need or academic merit in depth. Nevertheless, the exercise is analytically valuable precisely because the interviewees had to work with incomplete information, as real-world selection panels often do.

3. UArctic’s founding goals as recalled by interviewees

Across the interviews, three founding goals stand out, which align with the founding document analysis but differ in articulation 25 years later.

The first goal is regional development and community viability in the North. It appears in the language of “in the North, for the North, by the North”, which Rune Rydén identified as the most successful expression of UArctic’s founding purpose. Rune remembered it as “such a good saying” because it captured northern agency rather than external intervention. Outi Snellman’s notes similarly emphasise “people of the Arctic” and shared Arctic identity, suggesting that UArctic’s purpose was to strengthen northern capacity, belonging and self-recognition.

The second goal is research, education and thematic collaboration across the circumpolar region. Paul Reichardt recalled that UArctic’s early attraction for the University of Alaska Fairbanks lay in “the potential connections of researchers” and in facilitating exchange and international student mobility. Terry Callaghan placed UArctic within a longer tradition of Arctic scientific cooperation, linking it to earlier international field networks and to INTERACT. Jón Haukur Ingimundarson showed how collaboration was translated into curriculum through the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, distance learning, field-based pedagogy and the north2north mobility programme.

The third goal is Indigenous participation and knowledge. All interviewees recognised this in some form, but with different emphases. Terry stressed that UArctic did not create Indigenous identity; rather, Indigenous peoples had already begun to reclaim pride and organise politically, and UArctic “recognised” and supported that process. Leslie King went further, arguing that Indigenous inclusion was present from the beginning of UArctic governance thinking, influenced by the Arctic Council experience and by the permanent participant model. She argued that young scholars should build Arctic knowledge in ways that respect, rather than absorb, Indigenous knowledge. Jón connected Indigenous knowledge to holistic and interdisciplinary curriculum design. Outi’s notes emphasise co-creation, Indigenous governance and shared evaluation, including the principle that Indigenous peoples should not merely be consulted but should be involved in shaping the process. Leslie’s later reflection suggests that the founding value should be read not only as inclusion, but as an unresolved movement from cultural presence to voice, and from voice to leadership in research and education.

> These goals are not independent domains. They form an integrated theory: northern communities need education and research capacity; education and research must be circumpolar, collaborative and locally relevant; and collaboration is legitimate only if Indigenous peoples and knowledge systems participate on meaningful terms.

4. Enabling mechanisms: how UArctic was expected to work

The interviews suggest that UArctic's theory of change rested on several enabling mechanisms. Figure 1 below describes the founding theory of change, interpreted from its founding documents (Heal, S. and Kullerud, L, 2026). These original long-term impact aims and the enabling mechanisms were referenced as prompts in the interviews described in this paper.

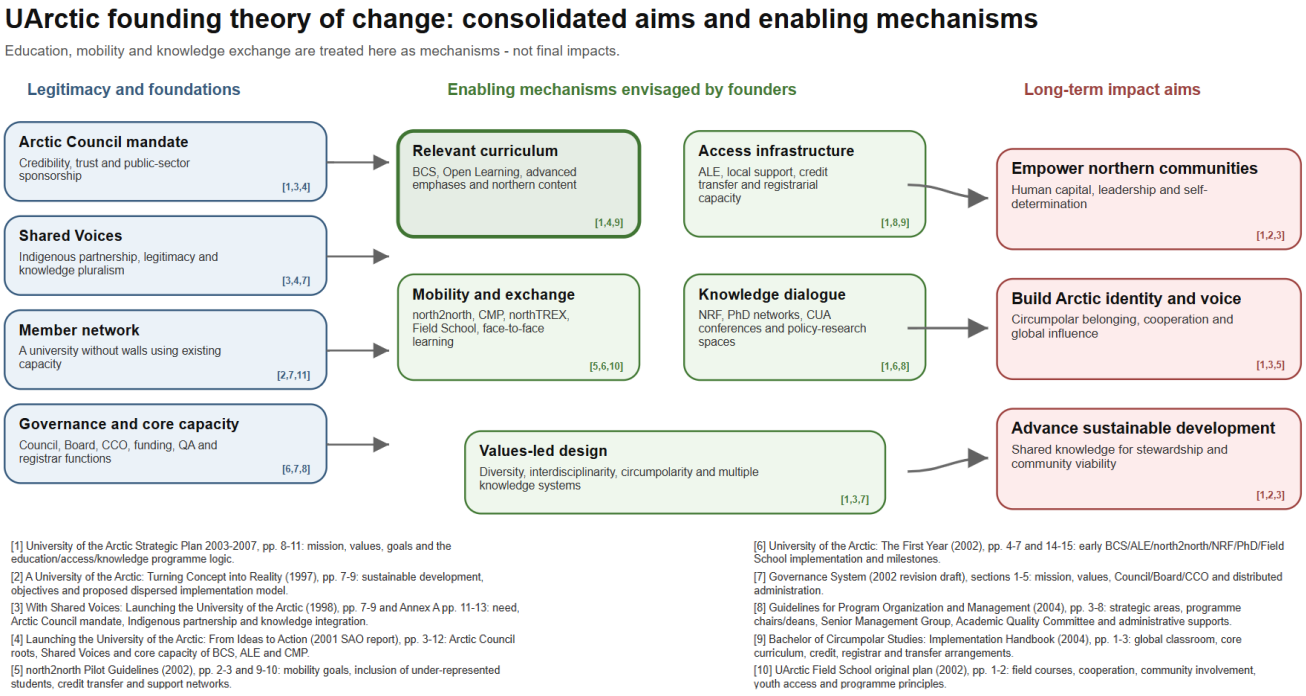


Figure 1. UArctic founding documents' long-term aims (Heal, S. and Kullerud, L, 2026)

4.1 Membership and network formation

Outi's account places membership at the centre of impact. Membership created belonging, legitimacy and a shared Arctic identity. UArctic's members were not merely administrative units; they were nodes in a wider identity and collaboration-building system. Terry gave a parallel account of INTERACT (International Network of Terrestrial Research and Monitoring in the Arctic), arguing that UArctic and INTERACT had "very similar aims" but approached them through different assets and activities: universities in one case, research stations in the other. In theory-of-change terms, the membership network was both an activity of the UArctic administration and an outcome once network effects became apparent. Members' contributions of capabilities and resources then became inputs for subsequent activities.

4.2 Mobility and encounter

Mobility is one of the strongest mechanisms across the interviews. Rune described the north2north mobility programme as small in numbers but "very influential and very important" because it gave people from places such as northern Finland and Alaska opportunities they would otherwise never have had. Leslie emphasised the cultural and social dimensions of meetings, assemblies and travel, including learning from one another through regional visits, parties, songs and cultural exchange. Outi's notes link mobility, field schools and digital connection to reduced barriers and distance.

4.3 Curriculum and educational architecture

Jón's interview provides the clearest account of curriculum as a mechanism for circumpolar collaboration and understanding of an Arctic identity. He describes the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies as built on principles of interdisciplinarity, circumpolarity, community viability, Western and Indigenous learning systems, classroom delivery and field-based learning. He also identifies an integrated plan resting on "three feet": the north2north mobility programme, seven core courses and distance education. This suggests that UArctic's early educational architecture was not an afterthought, but an operational expression of founding values.

4.4 Digital and distributed learning

Both Jón and Paul recalled early attempts to use internet-based learning environments. Athabasca University, known as Canada's online university, was involved in developing a UArctic Learning Environment (ALE) before 2000, while Paul recalled that early digital teaching faced technical limits because connectivity was far weaker than it is today. Nevertheless, both saw this as evidence that digital education was incorporated into UArctic's thinking early, making the network better prepared for later technological possibilities.

4.5 Thematic Networks

Rune identified Thematic Networks as a later mechanism and "one of the most important ideas behind University of the Arctic today". Jón similarly argued that as undergraduate foundations evolved into graduate education and research, thematic networks were key. Thematic Networks were not described as such in the founding documents; rather, the documents referred to knowledge dialogue, conferences and PhD networks as enabling mechanisms. However, the concept was developed in the early years, and Thematic Networks have since become a critical mechanism for UArctic, as Rune points out. Thematic Networks therefore appear as an adaptive mechanism: they allowed the broad UArctic network of scholars and educators to focus on specific fields and problems.

4.6 Governance, values-led design and meeting culture

Rune's account of the "Rune's Rules" adds an often-overlooked mechanism: meeting rules. He described them as "simple rules" for how people should behave at meetings, written after a difficult meeting where one group was perceived to dominate. This matters because network governance depends on process legitimacy. In a distributed institution, fair meetings are not a marginal administrative detail; they are part of the infrastructure of collaboration. Leslie King recalls an earlier governance proposal with Oran Young that drew on Young's experience at the Arctic Council and sought to base UArctic governance directly on founding values and goals.

5. The Founders’ Scholars exercise as values-in-action

The applicant summary sent to interviewees listed eleven candidates with a short description of the projects that they were to present at the congress. The shortlist comprised seven early-career researchers and four PhD students. Their topics included rural digital education, place-based education in Greenlandic primary schools, emergency response in remote communities, whaling and whale commodification, permafrost and water security, Arctic tourism law, tourism and permafrost degradation, Sámi duodji and education, social choice and regional development, Indigenous community engagement, and child health inequality in Kalaallit Nunaat. The note stated that all candidates had abstracts accepted for the UArctic Congress 2026 and that the aim was to support scholars who “in some way represent” the founders’ vision and values (UArctic Founders Scholar shortlist, April 2026).

The exercise is analytically important because it forced prioritisation. Interviewees could not simply affirm every founding value; they had to choose projects and explain why those projects best represented UArctic’s founding spirit. Outi Snellman declined to participate in the candidate-selection exercise because of her ongoing role as Secretary General of UArctic.



Founders contributing to the Inaugural Founders' Scholars choice in 2026

5.1 Terry Callaghan: need, circumpolarity and network potential

Terry’s selection logic was the clearest and most operational. He ranked emergency care first because small Arctic communities lack emergency care and experience avoidable illness, pain and risk. He ranked drinking water second because water quality is a pan-Arctic health issue linked to permafrost, infrastructure and trace elements. He also supported projects on Indigenous development values and Indigenous justice because they addressed regional development, vulnerability to extractive industry and had circumpolar relevance.

> His key criterion was: “What is the need and how geographically wide is it?” He also argued that PhD and postdoctoral projects should not be treated as isolated pieces of academic work but as “the start of a network”. Terry’s choices therefore translate the founding spirit into three tests: practical need, circumpolar relevance and network potential.

5.2 Leslie King: Pan-Arcticism, educational innovation, equity and need

Leslie began from the founding ethos. She recalled “the incredible excitement” of creating UArctic and worried that institutionalisation might weaken the “effervescent spirit” of the early days. Her primary principle was pan-Arcticism: scholars should be willing to move beyond their own part of the Arctic and relate to the whole.

Her choices and preferences reflected this principle. She favoured candidates working on Indigenous issues, a candidate with three accepted abstracts, which she interpreted as evidence of enthusiasm and energy, and a candidate working on innovative education and multicultural learning in the digital era. Her criteria included Indigenous representation, educational innovation, need, early-career status and geographical equity. She was explicit that the awards should not simply go to well-supported or already established candidates. Leslie’s choice of scholars working in Indigenous contexts relates to her wider view that Indigenous programmes should create spaces in which Indigenous people control their own educational processes.

5.3 Paul Reichardt: interdisciplinarity, circumpolarity and diversity

Paul approached the exercise by returning to UArctic’s stated foundations and extracting three principles: interdisciplinarity, circumpolarity and diversity. He highlighted one candidate because the project combined green transition and Indigenous voices; another because of community engagement; a third because multicultural learning is important and difficult; and a fourth because permafrost and water security are major issues across the Arctic.

> Paul’s choices signal a research-university interpretation of the founding goals. He values projects that connect fields, peoples and institutions around problems that do not respect borders. His wider comment that “we need our best minds working on the issues” captures this orientation.

5.4 Jón Haukur Ingimundarson: curriculum principles, community viability and hidden inequalities

Jón judged the candidates through the principles of the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies: interdisciplinarity, circumpolarity, community viability, Western and Indigenous knowledge systems, field learning, distance learning and rural relevance. He was particularly drawn to place-based and nature-based learning in Greenlandic primary schools, innovative rural education in the digital era, emergency care in remote First Nations communities, child health inequalities in Greenland and water security.

His most distinctive contribution is the warning against romanticising Indigenous or rural communities. In recalling curriculum debates with elders, he insisted that education must not only reproduce dominant voices, such as elder male storytelling, but also recognise women, children, artists, LGBTQ+ communities and hidden harms. His support for child health inequalities in Greenland came from this internal justice perspective.

5.5 Rune Rydén: good projects, thematic variety and geographical spread

Rune's selection criteria were concise: good projects, different kinds of projects and even distribution across the circumpolar region. He chose a candidate working on rural digital education, another working on water security in Greenland, one working on Sámi duodji and education spaces, and one working on child health inequalities in Greenland. He explicitly recognised that scientific judgement was difficult from short summaries, so he focused on balance and representation.

Rune's choices reflect his practical understanding of UArctic as a network that must avoid domination by one topic, one geography or one group. His logic is less explicitly theoretical than some of the other accounts, but highly relevant to UArctic's functioning as a distributed institution.

6. What the choices reveal about founding aims

The choices reveal six contemporary interpretations of UArctic's founding aims.

6.1 UArctic remains an educational project

One candidate working on rural education in the digital era received support from Leslie, Paul, Jón and Rune. A second, focused on place-based learning in Greenlandic primary schools, was strongly supported by Jón. A third, focused on Sámi duodji and education spaces, was supported by Leslie and Rune. These choices indicate that the founders still see education as central to UArctic. However, education is not understood narrowly as course delivery. It is rural, digital, multicultural, place-based, Indigenous, lifelong and linked to community viability.

6.2 Practical northern needs matter

> Terry and Jón strongly supported candidates working on emergency care in remote communities; Terry, Paul, Jón and Rune supported water security. These choices signal that UArctic's founding values are not only symbolic or academic. They point towards practical problems that shape whether northern communities can remain viable: water, health, emergency response, climate adaptation and local capacity.



Sámi duodji in practice
Photo credit: Arla Magga

6.3 Circumpolarity is a selection principle

Across the interviews, projects gained strength when interviewees saw them as relevant beyond one location. Water security in Greenland became compelling because it connected to permafrost, infrastructure and water problems across the Arctic. Social choice and regional development gained support because they addressed values and preferences in Arctic development. Emergency care mattered because remote communities across the North face similar constraints.

6.4 Indigenous futures are central but not singular

Several candidates were supported because they engaged Indigenous voices, knowledge, education or futures. However, the interviews also show that “Indigenous” is not a single category. The founders discussed Indigenous representation, knowledge systems, cultural heritage, justice, community engagement, child health, self-government, craft, education and avoidance of harm. Several founders suggested that UArctic’s Indigenous commitment should not be reduced to representation alone; it also concerns process, epistemology, safety, governance and power. Leslie’s later reflection makes the distinction explicit: earlier organisations made room for Indigenous culture while still falling short of Indigenous participation in leadership.

6.5 The founders value early-career formation

> Leslie and Paul both raised career stage. Leslie preferred those “starting out” and argued that established professionals may not need the award in the same way. Paul’s “heart” was with students rather than more established graduates. This matters for the Founders’ Scholars project: a small grant is most faithful to the founding spirit when it creates a relationship, opportunity or network that would not otherwise exist.

6.6 The selection should be a group signal, not only an individual prize

Rune’s insistence on different kinds of projects and geographical spread is also important. The final group of scholars should collectively represent the founding values. One scholar might signal Indigenous futures; another, educational innovation; another, practical climate-linked community need. The selection should therefore be read as a portfolio of values rather than a simple ranking of academic merit.

7. Inaugural Founders' Scholars awarded

Three inaugural Founders' Scholars representing the portfolio of founding values were presented with their awards by Secretary General Outi Snellman at the UArctic Congress in May 2026 in Tórshavn Faroe Islands, Kingdom of Denmark.



Aaron Orkin
University of Toronto



Arla Magga
University of Oulu



Ida Huusmann
Technical University of Denmark

- **Aaron Orkin** is a Canadian ECR at the University of Toronto, empowering volunteer responders for emergency care in underserved Arctic communities. He also serves as Medical Director for Ornge's Emerging First Response Team program. He is involved in several presentations at Congress that collectively represent a programme of research and practice focused on strengthening local emergency capacity, translating evidence into community-owned response systems, and advancing culturally grounded methods to support engagement, reflection, and sustained implementation in Arctic and Indigenous communities.

- **Arla Magga** is a Sámi PhD student at the University of Oulu in Finland. She is presenting at Congress on Sámi duodji and Sámi education as spaces of Indigenous desire-based future-making. Sámi duodji refers to clothes, accessories or means of transport mostly made with traditional techniques of handwork. Traditionally, these skills have been preconditions for Indigenous Sámi people to survive in the Arctic North. Modernisation and relocation of Sámi children to residential schools, among other things, have led to a decline in craft skills that many Sámi are trying to revive. The purpose of her research and presentation is to explore components of creating safer spaces for Indigenous futures while preserving cultural heritage.

- **Ida Huusmann** is a Danish PhD student and ECR at the Technical University of Denmark. Her studies on the degradation of drinking water as an effect of climate change will be presented at Congress. Her research focuses on drinking water pollution in Greenland driven by climate change and permafrost thaw. It integrates fieldwork and geospatial analysis, with collaboration from representatives in the municipalities to assess a pan-Greenlandic evaluation of future water security.

> The Founders' Scholars programme is designed to grow the network of Founders' Scholars through time, with each UArctic Congress meeting - funding Early Career Researchers and PhD candidates to travel to the Congress, present their work, build enduring circumpolar networks and positively impact the future of the Arctic - as the Founders did.

8. Reconstructing UArctic's theory of change

The interviews and choice exercise suggest the following reconstructed theory of change.

8.1 Context

The Arctic is geographically vast, institutionally fragmented and culturally diverse. Its communities face shared but locally differentiated challenges: climate change, distance, limited access to education, infrastructure vulnerability, pressures from extractive industries, language barriers, Indigenous rights and historic injustices. Recent geopolitical instability, particularly Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, has produced ruptures in Arctic co-operation, putting many elements of the founding vision, network relationships and governance architecture to the test.

8.2 Founding problem addressed

> Existing higher education systems were not sufficient to meet these challenges. They were too national, too fragmented, too southern-facing, too disciplinary and too disconnected from northern communities. The Arctic needed a networked educational and research infrastructure that could support people "in the North, for the North, by the North".

8.3 Inputs

UArctic's inputs included member institutions, founder leadership, northern colleges and universities, research stations and scientific networks, Indigenous knowledge holders, mobility funding, curriculum working groups, digital learning platforms, field schools, governance rules and convening capacity.

8.4 Activities

The key activities were building a membership network, supporting student and staff mobility, creating shared curriculum, enabling field-based and digital learning, supporting Thematic Networks, convening meetings, creating governance processes, facilitating co-creation with Indigenous peoples, supporting Indigenous-led research and education, and sustaining relationships across borders.

8.5 Outputs

Outputs included the Bachelor of Circumpolar Studies, north2north mobility exchanges, shared courses, congresses and assemblies, Thematic Networks, collaborative projects, field schools, educational materials, institutional partnerships and Founders' Scholars.

8.6 Outcomes

The intended outcomes were greater access to education, stronger research collaboration, more relevant Arctic curricula, enhanced Indigenous participation, greater authority and self-direction in research and education, practical capacity in northern communities, stronger student and researcher networks, shared identity and reduced distance across the circumpolar region.

8.7 Impacts

The anticipated long-term impacts described in these founder interviews are relational and institutional:

a. Stronger pan-Arctic identity
b. Increased northern social capital
c. More resilient knowledge networks
d. Greater capacity to respond to shared Arctic problems
e. Preservation of relationships that may support future cooperation, including after geopolitical rupture

8.8 How the Founders' reflections compare with the original ToC

The founders' reconstructed theory of change is recognisably continuous with the theory derived from the founding documents more than twenty years earlier. Both place a distributed member network, institutional legitimacy, Indigenous participation, curriculum and knowledge exchange, mobility and access at the centre of how UArctic creates value. Both also point towards similar long-term ambitions: stronger northern communities and human capital, a shared Arctic identity and voice, and more sustainable development. The interviews therefore suggest that the original causal logic has proved durable. The founders still understand UArctic primarily as connective infrastructure that enables institutions and people to do together what would be difficult to achieve separately.

The main differences reflect experience, adaptation and a changed Arctic context rather than a new mission. The reconstructed model makes the intermediate outcomes more explicit: trust, social capital, stronger cross-border networks, practical community capacity and greater Indigenous authority and self-direction in research and education. It also gives greater prominence to mechanisms that matured after the founding period, particularly Thematic Networks, digital and field-based learning, and co-creation. Finally, geopolitical rupture introduces a concern that was far less visible in the founding documents: maintaining resilient relationships and institutional memory so that lawful and principled cooperation can be rebuilt when circumstances permit. In this sense, the reconstructed theory of change is a longitudinal reinterpretation of the founding model, informed by more than two decades of practice.

9. Signals for current and future UArctic leadership

The interviews and selection exercise carry several signals for current and future leadership.

Founding energy: UArctic should not allow institutionalisation to replace founding energy. Leslie's warning is direct: UArctic risks losing the idealistic spirit that animated its creation. The Founders' Scholars initiative can help renew that spirit if it is more than ceremonial.

Education central: UArctic should keep education central but redefine it for contemporary Arctic realities. Rural digital education, place-based primary education, field schools and multicultural learning are not marginal to UArctic; they are contemporary expressions of the founding educational mission.

Northern community needs: Practical community need should remain a test of relevance. Emergency care and water security were repeatedly valued because they matter to people's lives. UArctic should continue to ask whether its networks help northern communities solve real problems.

Substantive Indigenous participation: Indigenous participation should be substantive, not symbolic. The interviews favour Indigenous representation, but also co-creation, governance, respect for knowledge systems and attention to internal inequalities. This suggests that UArctic leadership should avoid performative inclusion and focus on process conditions. The leadership test is whether Indigenous participation changes who sets questions, controls processes and defines educational spaces, not only who is consulted or invited.

Protect mobility: UArctic should protect mobility and encounter. Several founders saw mobility as disproportionately influential. Even small numbers of student exchanges can create relationships, identity and lifelong networks.

Thematic Networks are strategic: UArctic should use Thematic Networks as strategic vehicles. Several founders see Thematic Networks as crucial to UArctic's current and future role. They are the means by which a broad network becomes substantively active.

Help member institutions adapt: UArctic should help member institutions to change themselves. Founders' experiences in their own universities suggest that UArctic's values need to be translated into institutional change inside member universities, while recognising that change is often difficult in university settings and can take generations.

Protect geopolitical capacity: UArctic should retain capacity for eventual lawful and principled reconnection with Russian members without ignoring present constraints. Terry, Paul, Rune and Outi all point, directly or indirectly, to the rupture caused by Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The lesson is not that normal collaboration can simply continue or easily resume, but that UArctic's relational infrastructure has strategic value. If contacts are lost completely, rebuilding will be harder.

10. Methodological reflection

The Founders' Scholars exercise worked because it made values operational. Founders often agree at a high level on concepts such as circumpolarity, Indigenous participation or education. However, when presented with eleven real candidates and limited funding, they had to reveal priorities.

The exercise revealed different evaluative logics:

- Terry used a need-and-circumpolarity test.
- Leslie used Pan-Arctic (noting it felt equivalent to circumpolarity), equity and educational innovation criteria.
- Paul used interdisciplinarity, circumpolarity and diversity.
- Jón used curriculum principles, community viability and holistic knowledge systems.
- Rune used project quality, variety and geographical spread.

> The differences show that UArctic's founding spirit is not a single doctrine. It is a cluster of values that can be expressed through different choices. This is analytically useful because it prevents the theory of change from becoming overly neat. UArctic's actual founding logic was plural: part educational movement, part scientific network, part Indigenous recognition and governance project, part mobility scheme, part institutional innovation, part peace-building infrastructure. Probably the strongest methodological defence of the Founders' Scholars exercise is that it turns institutional memory into a constrained choice, which often reveals priorities more clearly than direct questions about values.



Reflections, Mývatn, Iceland | Photo credit: Stephen Heal

11. Conclusion

The interviews suggest that UArctic's founding aims were both practical and aspirational. The practical aims (the activities or enabling mechanisms) were to build courses, mobility schemes, networks, governance structures and collaborations. The long-term impacts were aspirational aims when UArctic was founded. They were to create a shared circumpolar identity, strengthen northern agency, support Indigenous participation and build social capital across a vast and fragmented region.

The Founders' Scholars exercise shows how these aims are now interpreted by founders. They look for scholars who can carry forward UArctic's founding spirit through rural education, digital learning, water security, emergency care, Indigenous futures, community justice, child health, place-based pedagogy and regional development. This pattern is not incidental. It maps closely onto UArctic's implied theory of change: build networks around shared Arctic problems; use education as an instrument of capacity and identity; respect Indigenous knowledge, agency and authority over research and education; and support people whose work can connect communities, institutions and future generations.

> The exercise also gives UArctic a leadership signal. The founders do not appear to want UArctic to become a purely administrative network. They want it to remain pan-Arctic, relational, educationally innovative, practically useful and ethically attentive. The Founders' Scholars initiative can therefore be more than a travel award. It can become a small but powerful ritual of institutional memory: a way of asking, every two years, what kind of Arctic future UArctic was founded to serve, and who among the next generation is best placed to carry that work forward.



Lars Kullerud and Outi Snellman at UArctic celebration 2006 | Photo credit: Terry Callaghan

Primary sources

1. Terry Callaghan interview with Stephen Heal and Laura Ditto, 8 April 2026. Transcript. Follow-up email exchange.
2. Leslie King interview with Stephen Heal and Laura Ditto, 8 April 2026. Follow-up interview 15 May 2026. Transcripts.
3. Paul Reichardt interview with Stephen Heal and Laura Ditto, 8 April 2026. Transcript.
4. Jón Haukur Ingimundarson interview with Stephen Heal and Laura Ditto, 10 April 2026. Transcript.
5. Rune Rydén interview with Stephen Heal, 10 April 2026. Transcript.
6. Outi Snellman interview memo, 16 September 2025, Rovaniemi. Based on Stephen Heal's interpreted notes rather than transcript.
7. "UArctic Founders' Scholars shortlist applicant redacted summary for discussion" April 2026. Five-page PDF circulated to interviewees.
8. UArctic's Founding Theory of Change. Heal, S. and Kullerud, L, 2026 (White paper under review)

Official Sources

- UArctic Congress and Assembly 2026. Official event page. Accessed 16 May 2026.
- UArctic north2north. Official programme page. Accessed 16 May 2026.
- UArctic History. Official history page. Accessed May and June 2026.
- UArctic Founders. Official Founder's list page. Accessed 16 May 2026.
- UArctic Founders' Scholars Announcement. UArctic News, May 2026

Annotated bibliography and methodological references

1. Weiss, C. H. (1995) ‘Nothing as Practical as Good Theory: Exploring Theory-Based Evaluation for Comprehensive Community Initiatives for Children and Families’, in Connell, J. P., Kubisch, A. C., Schorr, L. B. and Weiss, C. H. (eds) New Approaches to Evaluating Community Initiatives. Washington, DC: Aspen Institute. This is a foundational reference for theory-based evaluation and is used for justifying reconstruction of UArctic’s implicit assumptions. It is cited in Rogers’s programme theory article.
2. Rogers, P. J. (2008) ‘Using Programme Theory to Evaluate Complicated and Complex Aspects of Interventions’, Evaluation, 14(1), pp. 29-48. Highly relevant because UArctic is a complex, multi-actor, networked intervention with emergent effects such as identity and social capital. doi: 10.1177/1356389007084674.
3. Mayne, J. (2012) ‘Contribution Analysis: Coming of Age?’, Evaluation, 18(3), pp. 270-280. Supports careful causal language. UArctic should be treated as a contributory cause within a wider Arctic ecosystem rather than as a sole cause of observed impacts. doi: 10.1177/1356389012451663.
4. Funnell, S. C. and Rogers, P. J. (2011) Purposeful Program Theory: Effective Use of Theories of Change and Logic Models. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Wiley. Used for developing the ToC structure from inputs through activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts. (ResearchGate)
5. Coryn, C. L. S., Noakes, L. A., Westine, C. D. and Schröter, D. C. (2011) ‘A Systematic Review of Theory-Driven Evaluation Practice From 1990 to 2009’, American Journal of Evaluation, 32(2), pp. 199-226. doi: 10.1177/1098214010389321. Situates theory-driven evaluation as a recognised evaluation tradition.
6. Finch, J. (1987) ‘The Vignette Technique in Survey Research’, Sociology, 21(1), pp. 105-114. Argues that concrete profiles or scenarios can elicit normative judgements.
7. Barter, C. and Renold, E. (1999) ‘The Use of Vignettes in Qualitative Research’, Social Research Update, 25. Supports the use of short candidate summaries as prompts for qualitative reflection.
8. Watts, S. and Stenner, P. (2012) Doing Q Methodological Research: Theory, Method and Interpretation. London: Sage. Referenced by analogy, since the Founders’ Scholars exercise involved subjective prioritisation and ranking, although this study is not a formal Q study.
9. Brent, R., Orr, M., Brawner, C. E. and Mobley, C. (2021) ‘Who Tells Your Story? A Card-Sort Activity for Eliciting Authentic Narratives’, International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20, pp. 1-11. doi: 10.1177/16094069211053104. Supports the idea that card-sort or ranking activities can deepen semi-structured interviews and reveal how people organise choices.
10. Conrad, L. Y. and Tucker, V. M. (2019) ‘Making it Tangible: Hybrid Card Sorting within Qualitative Interviews’, Journal of Documentation, 75(2), pp. 397-416. doi: 10.1108/JD-06-2018-0091. Argues that object-based or choice-based tasks can make abstract mental models more tangible in interviews.
11. Bowen, G. A. (2009) ‘Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method’, Qualitative Research Journal, 9(2), pp. 27-40. doi: 10.3316/QRJ0902027. Used to support inclusion of the founding documents as a documentary baseline.
12. Heal, S. and Kullerud, L. (2026) ‘Founding Aims and enabling mechanisms of UArctic’. Provided the background context and aims analysis for the interviews with founders. (In development as a sister white paper to this paper.)
13. Scott, J. (1990) A Matter of Record: Documentary Sources in Social Research. Cambridge: Polity Press.
14. Pierson, P. (2004) Politics in Time: History, Institutions, and Social Analysis. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
15. Selznick, P. (1957) Leadership in Administration: A Sociological Interpretation. New York: Harper & Row.
16. Albert, S. and Whetten, D. A. (1985) ‘Organizational Identity’, Research in Organizational Behavior, 7, pp. 263-295.

UArctic



Steps toward the future, Pyhätunturi, Finland
Photo credit: Stephen Heal