

Inuit Nunangat University: a critical investment in Canada's Arctic future

The time to act is now. Supporting Inuit Nunangat University is an opportunity to create a stronger, more inclusive, and just Canada while securing our shared Arctic future.



Natan Obed is president of Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the national representative organization for Inuit in Canada. *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade

[Opinion](#) | BY [NATAN OBED](#) | December 2, 2024

The Arctic is central to Canada's identity, security, and prosperity, yet it remains misunderstood by much of the country. Inuit Nunangat—the Inuit homeland—spans nearly 40 per cent of Canada's land area and 72 per cent of its coastline. It is the frontline for climate change and a cornerstone of Arctic sovereignty. Despite its strategic importance, the divide between the north and south, Inuit and non-Inuit, persists—geographically, economically, and socially.

Inuit communities face a higher cost of living, rapidly accelerating climate impacts, and significant barriers to education and economic opportunity. Although Inuit youth make up a growing and vibrant demographic, our post-secondary education rates remain low. For many Inuit who pursue higher education, they often leave their families and culture behind to travel thousands of kilometres south.

One transformative solution stands out: the establishment of an Inuit-led university in our Arctic homeland, Inuit Nunangat. For more than a decade, Inuit have envisioned a university that is designed, governed, and operated by Inuit. This institution would empower communities, strengthen Inuit self-determination, and enrich Canada as an Arctic nation.

Last week, the vision took a monumental step forward with a \$50-million investment from the Mastercard Foundation to fund key start-up elements of Inuit Nunangat University. This first-of-

its-kind Canadian institution will provide world-class education in Inuit Nunangat, blending academic excellence with cultural relevance.

Inuit Nunangat University will address the pressing need for post-secondary opportunities tailored to Inuit priorities, including health, environmental, and social sciences. It will also foster northern research capacity, advancing knowledge in areas critical to both Inuit and Canada. By basing Inuit perspectives into its curriculum and operations, the University will promote a model of learning that respects and uplifts Inuit culture while integrating western methodologies.

The establishment of Inuit Nunangat University will drive economic diversification in Inuit Nunangat, providing new career pathways and fostering innovation. Importantly, the university represents a concrete step toward reconciliation and the fulfillment of promises made by Canada to support Inuit self-determination.

The statistics speak to the urgency of this initiative. According to the 2020 Inuit Post-Secondary Education Strategy, only 14 per cent of Inuit aged 15–64 hold a college diploma or university degree, compared to 42 percent of non-Indigenous Canadians. Education is one of the starkest gaps in equity between Inuit and the rest of Canada. Inuit leaders have long championed a vision for an Inuit-led university, including in the 2011 National Strategy on Inuit Education. It is not just a dream—it is a necessity.

The university's impact extends beyond Inuit Nunangat. It will serve as a beacon of Arctic innovation and bolster Canada's Arctic sovereignty by anchoring expertise and development in the region. A robust Arctic is vital for Canada's security and global standing, and Inuit Nunangat University will play a pivotal role in achieving this.

Realizing this vision requires continued public and private support. The 2024 Inuit Crown Partnership Committee commitment is a meaningful step, but much more needs to be done. Governments at all levels, industry stakeholders, and private organizations must partner in this initiative to ensure the necessary funding and resources are secured to bring the University to life and ensure a sustainable future.

Inuit youth wish for the same opportunities for growth and success as their southern peers. By investing in Inuit Nunangat University, we invest in the future of Inuit communities, the preservation of Inuit culture, and Canada's leadership as an Arctic nation. This is not just an Inuit issue—it is a Canadian one.

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