University of Lapland Academic Semester Opening Fall 2012 Sep 3

Jan Henry Keskitalo

# Indigenous Perspectives in Higher Education

Honored academic community of University of Lapland;

Rector, students, faculty, staff and guests

I feel much honored of being invited to address you during the opening of this academic semester. So first of all let me forward sincere thanks to rector Mauri Ylä-Kotola for the invitation During the years I have frequently visited this university, and the university is a well known and well-repeated member of the University of the Arctic both since the university hosts the international secretariat of the UArctic and as such has been a driving and considerably force in the network, but also in terms of hosting several of the thematic networks of the UArctic. Additionally, the University of Lapland has hosted many important events regarding the University of the Arctic, and continues with supporting the network by hosting the organizational struggle for UArctic funding and the UArctic Association.

It is quite natural for me when being invited here l as the VP of Indigenous Affairs of UArctic to focus mainly on the arctic. An important part of my daily job is ensuring that respect for and inclusion of indigenous perspectives, traditions, and systems of knowledge are included in all aspects of the University of the Arctic’s activities.

However, many of the values that are reflected in the UArctic priorities regarding indigenous higher education are well-known and shared with the wishes and goals of indigenous higher education world-wide. Therefore, UArctic values, and priorities regarding indigenous involvement are examples of priorities that could be shared world-wide.

UArctic partners with indigenous peoples, in recognizing their integral role in northern education, training, knowledge generation and transfer, and strives to engage their perspectives and participation in all of its activities.

The overall goal of UArctic is to create a strong, sustainable circumpolar region by empowering northerners and indigenous peoples through its activities education, training and shared knowledge. Promoting excellence in knowledge generation, and knowledge application, in areas relevant to the indigenous peoples and generally for the Northern communities are among the basic ideas of creating the network. UArctic through its vision, values, goals, strategic priorities, its organization and programs gives cooperation with the indigenous communities and indigenous peoples high priority, and, those priorities belongs to the arguments behind organizing the network: the early ideas, the support from the Arctic Council, the cooperation with the permanent participants (the indigenous NGO’s of the arctic) of the Arctic Council. All this is integrated in UArctic governance documents, in UArctic guidelines and in the practices of the thematic networks and the programs. It is also an steadily ongoing discussion how to best facilitate the values and principles.

By presenting these facts I must of course admit that the practical application is in the hands of the chairs of the programs and the instructors. Now by forming a student association, and by organizing student forum connected to the rector’s forum of the UArctic we learn that student representatives, regardless being indigenous or not rises important challenges about how giving even more priorities to the indigenous perspectives. And therefore think we are on the right track in UArctic cooperation but that does not mean we cannot improve. But as a network we will succeed to the degree our members practice the visions, values and goals of the network.

Let me then turn to more concrete questions of indigenous perspectives on higher education.

In the beginning I already mentioned the respect of and inclusion of indigenous perspectives, traditions, and systems of knowledge are included in all aspects of the University of the Arctic’s activities. Together we share a vision, and we work together with shared voices.

These above mentioned principles have since many years been among the guiding principles when discussing indigenous rights to education. For example during the process of drafting the UN Declaration of Indigenous Rights (UNDRIP) these principles among the core of the discussions, and are included, and stated even stronger in the final declaration of 2007: it declares a right for Indigenous peoples to exercise such principles. There is an ongoing work in the UN system now, to do a follow-up work on the declaration to investigate how it is implemented and practiced. The Sami Parliamentary Council and the Sami NGO’s has jointly just finished their preparation for the next steps of this process: steps that will end up in statements presented to the UN Indigenous World Conference in 2014. But again when it comes to implementation and practice of the international laws and international declarations it is in the hands of the UN member states interest and policy.

If we know focus on the quality dimension of these matters, I would like to bring forward some aspects of what I mean are indigenous perspectives on higher education: **Respect, relevance, reciprocity and reliability.** In the following I will comment on each one of these aspects.

**Respect is fundamental**: to respect people for whom they are, to respect their cultural background and to respect their values and knowledge systems. Respect has to be exercised both on the individual level and at the system level.

It is therefore for example necessary to give priority for the possibility for indigenous students to have access to quality programs that is of value for them and take their background into account: to study should not mean to leave and forget their cultural values but combined them with academic studies. And on the same time there must exist a willingness to and practice also to create job opportunities for students with this background in their home area because these are resource people for the future of their homeland. So access to programs of quality is a must and programs should also reflect needs of the communities involved. The aspect of respect also covers the need for respecting traditional knowledge and to work towards program design that includes the combination and integration of academic and traditional knowledge. But showing respect also means to accept that the traditional knowledge has its roots of origin that needs protection towards utilization that does not protect and give benefit to the knowledge holder.

This brings us to the question of **relevance.** Programs, how they are organized and their content must of course be of academic relevance and quality. But at the same time they need to be based on and reflect the needs for further development both for the indigenous individual as well as for the indigenous communities. The aspect of relevance is needed as to promote and support a sustained future in indigenous homelands. The respect and the relevance aspect both must be developed as parallels for the individual and for the community. At the same time we must keep in mind that in many cases to fulfill this one must do several things at the same time to fulfill this parallel approach. It is necessary to train indigenous people for future jobs in the northern communities but at the same time also train people from outside for their jobs in the communities. In many cases the need for professionals is larger than the possible recruitment of indigenous individuals to be trined. So the question of relevance in higher education also counts for how higher education institutions offers programs of relevance for those from outside that will seek a professional future in northern communities. This must be done because that is about practicing respect towards indigenous peoples. Learning the indigenous language, respecting the ways of thinking of the indigenous peoples is among the basics when it comes to do a professional job with quality. Therefore programs should be offered to meet these needs as well.

**Reciprocity** is another aspect. From my point of departure this means that higher education institutions needs to organize quality cooperation with indigenous parliaments and NGO’s, as well as with municipality authorities to discuss and to carry out well planned and organized community studies and to do follow up of these in programs development. At the same time, as parallel to this, to include the indigenous parliaments representatives and NGO representatives in governing bodies of the higher education institutions. This will open the possibility for increased mutual understanding and would also fit the intention of the UN Declaration on Indigenous Rights. It will empower the communities, and it will lead towards real and realistic capacity building for the indigenous individuals and for the communities. Another piece of this aspect is to network across institutions and nation borders: The simple fact is that indigenous peoples often are divided by nation state borders. This should not block the possibility for an intense networking to solve these challenges. But I must admit that in many cases the funding systems and education regulations are not sufficient and flexible enough to create good solutions for the time being. And in the case of the Nordic Sámi cooperation let us hope that a Nordic Sámi Convention will open new gates. But already there are in existence agreements between institutions both in the Nordic countries as well as in the entire Arctic, as well as mobility funding systems that could be even better used for promoting indigenous priorities.

**Reliability** is an aspect that reminds us all about to be both realistic in what we plan and do. On the other hand institutional policy towards indigenous needs of higher education must not only be in the hands of what individuals do or prefer. Promises given must be institutionalized in an organized and mutually accepted manner. They must be carried out in due time, and with the necessary composition and funding. But again the combination of respect, relevance and reciprocity needs to be the base which upon the reliability needs to be carried out.

Having presented some aspects I mean are among the most crucial parts of indigenous perspectives of higher education I will now turn to my starting point the University of the Arctic. In my view the UArctic network is an answer to many of the aspects I have mentioned. The possibilities are there to be utilized more. There is room for more multilateral cooperation between institutions to cooperate on program composition and joint grades. It is possible to better utilize the mobility programs and cooperate on faculty exchange. Especially the smaller institutions have the opportunity to benefit from these possibilities. It is possible to engage more at the institutional level in terms of taking turns in instruction in distance delivery programs, to engage more on composing programs of relevance for indigenous students and communities that also covers the pan-arctic cooperation.

With regard to the international indigenous cooperation if we in UArctic, and you at your home institution can succeed in promoting these aspects and perspectives to be implemented into practice we are then well prepared to respond to the principles of the UN Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Thank you for and I wish you all the very best for this new academic semester!