Building Northern Capacity.

The University of Saskatchewan’s Master of Northern Governance and Development

At a Glance

- The University of Saskatchewan’s (U of S) Master of Northern Governance and Development (MNGD) program was created to build capacity in Northern Saskatchewan.

- The majority of MNGD students are simultaneously employed full time. About 85 per cent of students are Indigenous and 80 per cent are mature students.

- The completion rate for the MNGD program is approximately 90 per cent—one of the highest completion rates for any graduate program at U of S.
Executive Summary

Canada’s northern regions, including Northern Saskatchewan, lag behind southern regions on indicators such as health and well-being, educational attainment, and income. The University of Saskatchewan’s Master of Northern Governance and Development (MNGD) program was created to develop leadership capacity in Northern Saskatchewan. This interdisciplinary program was designed in consultation with Northern stakeholders to meet the needs of learners and communities in the North.

The MNGD program was designed as a two-year master’s program and consists of coursework, an international field school in a northern region, and an internship that culminates in a research project. Courses are delivered through a blend of distance learning, including video conferencing and online learning, and on-site teaching. The courses offered are specifically designed to be relevant to a Northern context and cover topics such as Northern resource economics and policy, circumpolar innovation, and Aboriginal self-determination. Students also participate in a 10-day field school outside Canada (typically Norway), where they take part in classroom activities, explore the region, and meet with community leaders. Mandatory internships help to build meaningful connections between communities in Northern Saskatchewan and the university.

Unlike traditional master’s programs in established disciplines, MNGD participants come from a wide range of academic and professional backgrounds. To overcome the uneven degree of student readiness for a graduate-level program, tutors are made available in Northern communities to assist students. Course instructors also give students extra assistance and guidance in completing course requirements. As
the majority of MNGD participants are mature learners who enrol part time while working full time, evening and distance courses are offered to meet their learning and scheduling needs.

Since it welcomed its first cohort of students for the 2010–11 school year, the MNGD program has played an important role in strengthening capacity in Northern Saskatchewan. Participating students have a strong connection to the North and about 85 per cent are Indigenous. The completion rate for the MNGD program is approximately 90 per cent—one of the highest completion rates for any graduate program at the University of Saskatchewan. Students value the opportunity to complete a graduate degree while living in the North, as well as a curriculum that is relevant to their Northern experiences.

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**Introduction**

The University of Saskatchewan’s (U of S) Master of Northern Governance and Development (MNGD) program is an interdisciplinary graduate program intended to build capacity in the North. It was designed in consultation with Northern stakeholders to ensure it meets the needs of learners and communities in Northern Saskatchewan. The program is delivered through blended teaching methods, including distance learning, to enable students who live and work in the North to complete a graduate degree.

**Overview**

Canada’s North has emerged as an important driver of economic growth over the last two decades due to its vast resource wealth in oil and gas, metals, and minerals. However, despite the significant potential of
its resource-based wealth, the North continues to lag behind southern regions on such indicators as health and well-being, educational attainment, and income.¹

Northern Saskatchewan is geographically defined as covering roughly the northern half of the province. The region is sparsely populated—about 37,000 people live in the area, or less than 4 per cent of the provincial population. The largest communities in the region are La Loche (population 3,000) and La Ronge (population 2,000). Northern Saskatchewan's population is young—about two-thirds of individuals are under the age of 35.² A significant majority of the population is Indigenous (86.9 per cent).³ In comparison, 15.6 per cent of the population of Saskatchewan is Indigenous.⁴

While Northern Saskatchewan is resource-rich, the region's people are quite poor, and there are considerable gaps in quality of life between Northern Saskatchewan and the southern parts of the province.⁵ The poorest Indigenous communities in Canada tend to be found in the provincial north of the prairie provinces, including Saskatchewan.⁶ Indeed, in 2010, Northern Saskatchewan was one of the poorest regions in Canada, with a median income of $16,963 per person.⁷

Educational attainment in Northern Saskatchewan lags behind that of the south. In 2011, 11.6 per cent of individuals aged 25 to 64 in Northern Saskatchewan had a college certificate or diploma, 8.8 per cent had a university degree, and 1.9 per cent had a university certificate, diploma, or degree above the bachelor level.⁸ In contrast, 21.3 per cent

¹ Jeffrey and others, Building a Resilient and Prosperous North, 7–8.
³ Statistics Canada, Division no. 18, CDR, Saskatchewan (Code 4718).
⁶ Ibid., 8.
⁷ International Centre for Northern Governance and Development, Northern Capacity Building Through Aboriginal Entrepreneurship; Statistics Canada, Division no. 18, CDR, Saskatchewan (Code 4718).
⁸ Statistics Canada, Division no. 18, CDR, Saskatchewan (Code 4718).
of Canadians had a college certificate or diploma, 25.9 per cent had a university degree, and 2.7 per cent had a university degree above the bachelor level.9 Traditionally, provincial governments located in the southern regions of Canada’s provinces have been reluctant to invest in post-secondary education in the North.10 A lack of local PSE institutions, particularly universities, is a major reason for lower educational attainment in Canada’s northern regions.11 However, increased resource development in Northern Saskatchewan, coupled with ongoing socio-economic challenges in many communities, has underscored the need to build regional capacity. Governance in northern regions is complex, involving not just federal and provincial or territorial governments, but also an expanding role for Indigenous and regional governments. A wide range of stakeholders, including industry and Indigenous development corporations, also plays a key role in the development and governance of the North.12

The MNGD program was created to develop leadership capacity in Northern Saskatchewan and to help Northerners benefit from the immense opportunities in the region and address socio-economic challenges.

Objectives and Processes

The MNGD program is part of the University of Saskatchewan’s International Centre for Northern Governance and Development (ICNGD). The ICNGD was formally launched in January 2009

10 Morrison, “In the North, For the North,” 63. In Canada, the development of PSE institutions in the North has traditionally followed economic and population growth. In contrast, PSE institutions in northern regions of Scandinavia have been used as a tool to fuel economic and population growth. For further discussion of how PSE institutions have been used to fuel the regional development of Northern Norway, see the SPSE briefing, Edge, The Role of UiT The Arctic University of Norway in Northern Development.
11 Howard and Edge, Policies, Laws, and Regulations, 84–86.
12 Coates and others, The Role of the Public Sector in Northern Governance; see also Jeffrey and others, Building a Resilient and Prosperous North.
with the goal of enhancing the capacity of Northern Saskatchewan through educational programs tailored to the North and community-applied research.\textsuperscript{13}

The ICNGD and Northern stakeholders began discussing the need for educational programs oriented to the needs of Northern Saskatchewan in 2008–09. In January 2009, the ICNGD held a workshop with stakeholders (Indigenous, industry, and government) from Northern Saskatchewan, as well as Alaska and Norway. One of the recommendations that emerged from the workshop was the need for a graduate program to build capacity in the North that did not require Northerners to leave their home communities. Stakeholders felt that a graduate program should cover such topics as how policy works in the North, resource policy and the economy, and Indigenous perspectives. Stakeholders also felt that the program should include an applied research component with direct applicability to Northern communities.\textsuperscript{14}

Following the stakeholder workshop, the MNGD program was created, welcoming its first cohort in the 2010–11 school year. The MNGD program—a two-year master’s program—consists of coursework, an international field school in a northern region, and an internship that culminates in a research project. Qualified students can receive up to $16,000 in funding over two years. The field school experience is fully funded, and travel costs are covered for times when students must be on campus. Students are also paid during the course of their internship.\textsuperscript{15}

To be accepted into the MNGD program, students must have a minimum four-year degree in a relevant academic discipline from a recognized college or university, as well as a GPA of at least 70 per cent in their

\textsuperscript{13} International Centre for Northern Governance and Development, \textit{About Us}.

\textsuperscript{14} Interview findings.

\textsuperscript{15} Interview findings; International Centre for Northern Governance and Development, \textit{Master of Northern Governance and Development}. 
last two years of study. Residents of Northern Saskatchewan, as well as individuals associated with Northern Indigenous communities and organizations, have priority for admission.

### Innovations

The MNGD program is not designed as a traditional research-based social science MA. Rather, it takes an innovative approach to program delivery that “seeks to provide students with a professional development experience that will contribute to their ability to provide leadership and positive change in their Northern communities.”

Mandatory core courses are specifically designed to be relevant to the Northern context. For example, students take courses in Northern resource economics and policy, circumpolar innovation (with a focus on how scientific and technological innovation is shaping the circumpolar world), Aboriginal self-determination through *mitho pimachesowin* (one translation: the ability to make a good living), and policy planning and evaluation in Northern communities. Students also participate in a course on professional communications in a Northern environment, where they learn how to produce documents such as formal reports and press releases.

To allow students to remain in their communities while studying, courses are made available using distance learning technology. Courses are delivered via Blackboard, an online platform that combines audio and video and allows students to chat, raise their hands, and be placed into smaller discussion groups or chat rooms. Some courses also incorporate interactive online tools such as blogs, wikis, and online discussion groups.

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16 University of Saskatchewan, *Master of Northern Governance and Development*.
17 Interview findings.
18 UArctic, *Apply for Master of Northern Governance and Development MNGD Program*.
20 Interview findings.
Distance learning technologies are sometimes regarded as challenging methods of program delivery because they may lead students to feel disconnected from their peers and instructor.\textsuperscript{21} However, alumni of the MNGD program have not found this to be the case. Rather, they indicate that they developed strong and lasting connections with their peers and instructors. One way the MNGD program develops strong connections is through an on-campus orientation week at the beginning of the school year. Students also spend time on campus each February to organize their internships and talk to their professors. Dates when students are required to be on campus are scheduled far in advance to allow students to structure their schedules accordingly.\textsuperscript{22}

Students develop strong connections to their peers and instructors through the international field school they are required to participate in as part of the program. During the field school, they spend 10 days in a northern region outside Canada, where half their time is allocated to classroom activities and half to meeting with community stakeholders and exploring the region. MNGD students typically travel to Northern Norway and Northern Sweden for these experiences.\textsuperscript{23}

The field school component of the program gives many Northern and First Nations students an opportunity to travel abroad that might not otherwise be available to them. It allows students to gain an understanding of how governance and development challenges are addressed in other northern regions.\textsuperscript{24} For example, in travelling to Northern Norway, which has a high standard of living compared with the south of the country, students see that high poverty levels do not need to be an inevitable part of living in the North.\textsuperscript{25}

\textsuperscript{21} Kawallilak and others, “E-learning Access, Opportunities, and Challenges”; Simon and others, \textit{Post-Secondary Distance Education in a Contemporary Colonial Context}, 12.

\textsuperscript{22} Interview findings.

\textsuperscript{23} International Centre for Northern Governance and Development, \textit{Master of Northern Governance and Development}, 8.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{25} Interview findings.
As one of the requirements of the MNGD program, students must complete a four-month internship and accompanying research project. Internships have Northern applicability and are with industry, government, Aboriginal groups, or not-for-profit organizations. Internships are administered through the Mitacs Accelerate program.

Mitacs is a national not-for-profit organization that designs and delivers internships for graduate students across Canada. It is Canada’s largest provider of internships for graduate students. Mitacs places graduate students, including those in the MNGD program, with industry and not-for-profit organizations to complete research projects that are supervised by university faculty. Employers pay $7,500 to the faculty supervisor in the form of a research grant for one MNGD student for a four-month internship (costs are reduced for employers funding more than six students). Students personally receive a stipend of at least $10,000 for their internship.

The topics for MNGD student internships and final research projects are determined by the needs of Northern communities and students’ interests. For example, one student’s research explored revenue-generating options for the La Ronge airport, while another examined supervisory positions in the uranium industry and the challenges and opportunities they pose for Northern Saskatchewan. The internships help build meaningful connections between communities in Northern Saskatchewan and the University of Saskatchewan. They are also a cost-effective way of strengthening knowledge and research capacity in the North.

26 See www.mitacs.ca for more information.
27 Mitacs, Accelerate. For an analysis of the Mitacs Accelerate program and its benefits, see Edge and Munro, Inside and Outside the Academy, 75–76.
28 University of Saskatchewan, Master of Northern Governance and Development: Internships.
Another innovative aspect of the MNGD program is earmarked funding to allow a small number of international students to enrol in the program each year. These students come from northern regions outside Canada (often Russia) and introduce an international perspective into classroom discussions.29

Resources

Aspects of the MNGD program, such as the international field school, make it more expensive to deliver than a traditional master’s program. The ICNGD looked to external stakeholders to help fund the cost of developing the MNGD program. The program founders felt that if the program was meeting the needs of the North, then external funders should be willing to invest.30 Its reliance on a special funding model (i.e., one that includes both private and public funds) to operate is currently critical to its sustainability. Private sector funders benefit explicitly from an increased pool of skilled job candidates and more generally from the increased skills and knowledge that graduates bring to Northern communities.

Since it welcomed its first cohort in 2010–11, the MNGD program has received significant funding from the public as well as the private sector. When the program was first launched, it received $1 million in funding from the Government of Saskatchewan. Cameco Corporation then matched the government’s funding commitment with a $1 million investment in the program over five years. Cameco’s funding was used for research internships, research support, scholarships, and distance learning support, including the creation of a state-of-the-art video conference facility.31

29 Interview findings.
30 Interview findings.
31 Government of Saskatchewan, New Investments for Saskatchewan’s North.
In 2015, the ICNGD received an additional $775,000 plus in-kind travel support from Cameco for its MNGD program, as well as a new master’s program in Governance and Entrepreneurship in Northern and Indigenous Areas. The funding will provide scholarships and travel costs for 12 students per year for five years. Since 2009, more than 50 MNGD students have benefited from financial support from Cameco.32

**Challenges and Solutions**

**Diversity of Student Backgrounds and Experiences**

Unlike most traditional master's programs, students enrolled in the MNGD program have widely varied academic and professional backgrounds. This creates challenges for the program instructors because students differ greatly in their disciplinary knowledge and readiness for the rigours of graduate school. In particular, weak written communication skills have been a challenge for a number of students in the program. Program participants’ wide variety of educational backgrounds, combined with the multi disciplinary nature of the courses taught, means that course material often does not go into the same level of depth or require the same high-level expertise as traditional, discipline-specific graduate programs.33

To assist students who need extra support, the MNGD program provides tutors who are on the ground in Northern communities to help students develop their skills. Course instructors give students extra assistance and guidance in completing course requirements and their major research project—more so than is typical for an MA program. The professional communications course that is part of their studies helps students strengthen their written communication skills. As awareness of the program has grown, the quality of applicants to the program has

32 Interview findings; *University of Saskatchewan News,* “U of S Centre Celebrates Key Partnerships.”

33 Interview findings.
improved. Program coordinators and instructors have also improved their
ability to communicate the expectations of graduate school to program
prospects and participants. 34

When the MNGD program was first launched, it was anticipated that
approximately 70 per cent of students would be enrolled full time. In fact,
the majority of MNGD students are employed and enrol in the program
on a part-time basis. About 80 per cent of enrollees are mature students,
and most students are also full-time parents and/or residents of the
North. Many students also have demanding leadership positions in their
community—for example, graduates of the program include the mayor of
La Ronge and several Indigenous chiefs. 35

In addition to offering courses through distance learning, many MNGD
courses are held in the evening to accommodate student schedules.
Program instructors also understand the need for flexibility in extenuating
circumstances, as some students have full-time jobs and families, and
heavy use of distance education technologies can reveal technical and
other difficulties. 36

**Funding and Availability of Internships**

Ensuring enough paid internships for MNGD students is always a
potential challenge for the program. Mitacs notes that it can sometimes
be difficult to find industry funding for internships in the social sciences. 37
Furthermore, there are a limited number of internships available at
companies in Northern Saskatchewan (due in part to the small size of

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34 Interview findings.
35 Interview findings; Cameron, “Northern Governance Program Has La Ronge
Mayor Thinking.”
36 Interview findings.
37 University of Saskatchewan, Master of Northern Governance and
Development: Internships.
many companies), and other potential employers, such as not-for-profit organizations and First Nations communities, may not have the funds available to hire an intern.38

The MNGD program has overcome this challenge through the funding it receives from Cameco. In addition to funding internships at the company itself, Cameco funds internships for MNGD students in other community and First Nations organizations it works with in Northern Saskatchewan. Other industry partners, such as credit unions in the North, also provide funding for internships. First Nations in Northern Saskatchewan provide support for the MNGD program through the in-kind supervision of internships. Mitacs notes that the MNGD program has been highly successful at partnering with industry to fund internships, and the MNGD internships are now one of its largest ongoing social science initiatives.39

Impacts and Benefits

Since the MNGD program accepted its first cohort of students for the 2010–11 school year, the program has enrolled about 12 students each year into the program. All students in the program have a strong connection to the North and 85 per cent are Indigenous. There is considerable demand for the program, which receives about 50 applications each year. The average completion time for the program is two years with a completion rate averaging 90 per cent—one of the highest rates for any graduate program at U of S.40

Instructors and program heads have found that students highly value the MNGD program—both for the opportunity to complete a graduate degree while living in the North and for a curriculum that is relevant to their Northern experiences.41 For example, the current mayor of La

38 Interview findings; University of Saskatchewan, Master of Northern Governance and Development: Internships.
39 Interview findings; University of Saskatchewan, Master of Northern Governance and Development: Internships.
40 Interview findings.
41 Interview findings.
Ronge, Thomas Sierzycki, a graduate of the program, has noted how the program allowed him to complete his graduate studies while serving as mayor and holding a private sector job. He said, “I’ve had such a good experience with the program. You get to study Northern economics, communications, and policy planning—all courses that have real-world applications here at home.”

A professor who teaches in the program noted that students are highly engaged in classroom discussions, and it is normal for seminar discussions to go over the time allocated. The program is helping to create positive role models in Northern Saskatchewan, particularly because many program graduates work in leadership positions in the North. In addition, the tight-knit nature of the program has helped to fuel the development of a network of highly skilled professionals in the North.

Applicability to Other Institutions and Regions

Throughout Canada, educational attainment in northern regions lags behind that in the south. Ensuring that Northern development is broadly beneficial, and the region’s socio-economic challenges are tackled, calls for a strong contingent of skilled and experienced professionals. However, building such capacity in the North can be challenging—there are few post-secondary programs that allow Northerners to continue to live and work in the North while completing their studies, and program curriculum is not always applicable to Northern issues and experiences.

42 Cameron, “Northern Governance Program Has La Ronge Mayor Thinking.”
43 Interview findings.
44 Interview findings.
The MNGD program model is a valuable tool for building capacity in Canada’s northern regions. Key aspects of the program that can be applied in other institutions and regions include:

- allowing students to continue living in their home communities while studying region-specific course content, thereby increasing the accessibility of graduate education in Northern communities (or elsewhere, as applied);
- research internships that focus on regional issues further contribute to solving challenges in the North;
- supplemental student supports, such as tutors, are targeted to students with varied educational backgrounds;
- partnerships between PSE institutions, communities, and other stakeholders to determine areas of critical need for Northern capacity building;
- partnerships between government, PSE institutions, and industry to fund programs that will build Northern capacity in areas of critical need.

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APPENDIX A

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