

Research Article

## University Education in Northern Manitoba: Inter Universities Services at 50

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**Abstract:** The long pursuit of university education in northern Canada has seen a variety of methods used to deliver higher education to northerners. One such approach, Inter Universities Services (IUS), has been supporting university course delivery in northern Manitoba since 1972-73. This article argues that IUS has evolved progressively over its fifty years from an initiative offering a disjointed set of university course options to become part of a coordinated, if unplanned, approach to university education in northern Manitoba. This article outlines the history of IUS, including origins, structure, issues, and key events, before looking to the future. Conclusions suggest that IUS has been central to the growth and stability of higher education in northern Manitoba.

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## Introduction

For decades, northern Canadians have risen to challenges created by geography, small populations, uneven educational and economic experiences, and widely dispersed and remote communities (Ferris, 1989; Senkpiel, 1997). These challenges have led to a variety of creative approaches to delivering university education in the North (Weller & Rosehart, 1985), including in northern Manitoba.

Demands from northern and Indigenous Manitobans for university education in northern Manitoba have been long-standing (Manitoba Advanced Education, 2002). Since 1966, education in trades and technology has been available in the region through the Northern Manitoba Vocational Centre, renamed Keewatin Community College in 1993 (Usher & Pelletier, 2017). It was only when that college became University College of the North (UCN) in 2004 that a more comprehensive approach to post-secondary education became available in northern Manitoba, including the development by UCN of an extensive set of regional campuses. While college programming was available in northern Manitoba, prior to UCN's creation, university programming was offered through extension efforts of universities in southern Manitoba.

Inter Universities North, later renamed Inter Universities Services ("IUS" will be used throughout for consistency), was the first of these arrangements in northern Manitoba. Starting formal operations in the 1972-73 fiscal year, IUS represented a collaborative approach to providing university education to northern Manitobans. Instead of a single institution delivering courses or programs, all three of Manitoba's universities in 1972 worked together to provide university course options.

Despite changes and challenges over the last half-century, IUS has retained its collaborative approach, reflecting a history of cooperation and innovation in Manitoba's post-secondary system. Over its fifty-year history, IUS has evolved from a disjointed set of university course options to a more coordinated approach to the provision of university courses, supporting activity undertaken by southern institutions while progressively contributing to greater stability and permanency of higher education in northern Manitoba.

This article is structured around the following research questions. First, what is IUS and how is it different from other approaches to delivering university education in the North? What were the major developmental events and outcomes in IUS's fifty-year history? What has this meant for university education for the peoples in northern Manitoba, and what might the future hold? After examining the literature on higher education in the North, this article explores the origins of

IUS, its structure, operations, and issues, before discussing its impact. Conclusions suggest that IUS has contributed significantly to the institutionalization and normalization of higher education in northern Manitoba.

### **Higher Education in the Canadian Provincial North**

Northern Canada can be divided into the Circumpolar North, the Territorial North, and the Provincial North. While there are valuable lessons to be learned from all areas, space considerations mean that focus here is given to the Provincial North, an area often overlooked in scholarship (Coates & Poelzer, 2014). The Provincial North includes the northern reaches of the four western provinces, Ontario, Quebec, as well as Newfoundland and Labrador, although each of these provinces defines the geographic boundaries of their northern regions differently, and in the case of Alberta, not at all (Coates et al., 2014). Strong support for educational opportunities at the degree level, including a physical university, to meet northern cultural, economic, and social needs has been expressed among northerners in all jurisdictions (Coates, 2007; Morrison, 2014; Senkpiel, 1997). Similar sentiments have also been expressed in Manitoba (Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak, 2000).

While the Provincial North has been well-served by technical colleges in northern communities (Coates, 2020), the establishment of stand-alone universities has sometimes been dismissed as unneeded (Coates, 2007; Morrison, 2014). Given small, widely dispersed populations, provincial governments have been reluctant to create universities in northern Canada, instead seeking a variety of other means to bring higher education to their northernmost regions (Coates, 2020; Morrison, 2014). Accordingly, discounting students moving to southern Canada for university education (Ferris, 1989), no single model has emerged for higher education in the Provincial North (Coates, 2020). Instead, a variety of models have been employed, discussed below.

Stand-alone universities are self-managed “bricks-and-mortar” institutions, often favoured by northern communities (Coates, 2020) in part because, despite the commitments of southern universities to northern education, this will never be their central focus (Ferris, 1989). Stand-alone universities located in the North, in contrast, focus their missions on the needs of the North. Because of the challenges of geography, population, and the cost of such ventures (Ferris, 1989), the creation of stand-alone universities in the Provincial North has been slow in Canada. In 1960, Laurentian University was established in Sudbury, Ontario. Other northern universities followed: in 1965, Lakehead University was established in Thunder Bay, although given its geographic location its status as a northern university has been contested (Morrison, 2014); in 1969, the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi opened, followed by the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue in

1970; in 1990, the University of Northern British Columbia was established; in 1992, Nipissing University opened in North Bay, Ontario; in 2004, the University College of the North (UCN) was established in northern Manitoba; and Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie received its own charter in 2008 (Coates, 2020; Morrison, 2014; Wilson, 2021). Alberta and Saskatchewan are alone among the provinces in not operating universities in their respective northern regions (Morrison, 2014).

Access points are smaller service centres providing limited courses and programs, such as first- and second-year courses. Although not a university, Northern College provides such an approach in trades education in Timmins, Ontario (Coates, 2020).

Satellite campuses see existing universities deliver selected programs or offer courses that provide pathways to degree completion on southern campuses (Coates, 2020). The University of Manitoba's Northern Social Work Program located in Thompson, Manitoba, is an example of a satellite campus providing a complete, single program on a continuing basis in the Provincial North.

Specific, cohort-based program delivery sees a university provide a specific program in a community for a period of time, enrolling a single cohort of students. Upon completion, the program may move to another community (Coates, 2020). This model is used by UCN in northern Manitoba to deliver a Bachelor of Education program to cohorts at up to four communities at a time, moving to other communities once the program has been completed. The University of Saskatchewan's Master of Northern Governance and Development is another example (Morrison, 2014).

Multi-institution program offerings see multiple universities collaborate on program delivery, with different institutions offering different courses and other aspects of programming. This model is used in northern Ontario to deliver medical education through a partnership between Laurentian University and Lakehead (Coates, 2020).

Distance education sees online and other remote means used to deliver university courses and programs. This model is used in many provinces and may be more structured in some, for example, eCampus Ontario (Coates, 2007).

Laddered programs between colleges and universities allow students to start a program at one institution, often a northern one, and then continue their education through remote means, or by physically attending another, often southern, campus or institution (Coates, 2020).

There has been a wide variety of approaches to higher education in the Provincial North, and individual provinces may use multiple methods. Given that each province has an existing university system, it is perhaps no surprise that

provinces extend university education northwards through their existing systems. It is worth noting that IUS does not fit neatly into any these models, although given its consortium approach IUS has similarities to the multi-institution program offerings model except IUS offers only courses, not programs. However, there are also parallels to the access points model and with the distance education model, confirming Coates's (2020) observation that there are no firm models for the delivery of higher education in northern and remote regions.

### **Northern Manitoba**

Northern Manitoba is defined as the region north of the 53<sup>rd</sup> parallel and is more than 560,000 km<sup>2</sup>, approximately the same size as France. The 56 million hectares of boreal forest in northern Manitoba—46.5 million hectares undeveloped (Pew, 2015)—is rich in mineral and other natural resources. More than 80,000 people, the majority Indigenous, call northern Manitoba home, many living in small, isolated communities (Smith, 2016).

In Manitoba, government efforts to strengthen northern Manitoba have often focused on post-secondary education (Coates & Poelzer, 2014). In 1966, the Northern Manitoba Vocational Centre (later renamed Keewatin Community College) was established to offer trades and technical training in The Pas, Manitoba. The delivery of university education in the North followed a less direct trajectory. Prior to the conversion of Keewatin Community College to UCN in 2004, university education was offered in the North through southern Manitoba universities. Complete university programs were offered through three initiatives: the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP) was established in 1975, rotating among different communities (Robertson & Loughton, 1976); the University of Manitoba's Bachelor of Social Work Program was established in Thompson, Manitoba, in 1983 (Spearman & van der Krabben, 1983); and the University of Manitoba's Bachelor of Nursing Program was established in 1990 in The Pas, subsequently offered as a joint program with Keewatin Community College (now UCN) beginning in 1998 in both Thompson and The Pas (Rady Faculty of Health Sciences, 2018).

Another initiative, appearing before the others, did not focus on a specific degree program but instead offered individual university courses in a variety of disciplines. This initiative, IUS, was established in 1972 (Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak, 2000; Morrison, 2014; UGC, 1973). All four initiatives, including IUS, relied upon southern universities to deliver university education in northern Manitoba. University education in northern Manitoba evolved slowly, in piecemeal fashion, and without a comprehensive plan—much like elsewhere in the Canadian Provincial North (Weller & Rosehart, 1986).

## **Research Methods**

This article is an examination of the fifty-year history of IUS in northern Manitoba, from 1972-73 to 2021-22. The article draws on a variety of sources, including scholarly literature, government reports, institutional data, and minutes and other documents produced by IUS. Given the author has served on the IUS steering committee, participant observation also contributed to the research.

Inconsistencies in data retention and reporting by IUS, the Government of Manitoba, and UCN hampered analysis of IUS performance throughout the fifty-year period. While complete data exists identifying the communities within which IUS operated, there is a ten-year gap in funding data, and two sixteen-year gaps, one pertaining to registration, and one pertaining to the courses offered. While conclusions can still be drawn, gaps mean that a clear understanding of when changes occurred may not be possible.

Interviews were an important part of data collection. Using elite interviewing, participants were selected “on the basis of what they might know to help the investigator fill in pieces of a puzzle or confirm the proper alignment of pieces already in place” (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002). Interview participants were former executives from UCN with responsibility for IUS and/or serving on IUS’s steering committee. Interviewees helped to articulate the trajectory of IUS, as well as helped to reconstruct and confirm events in the initiative’s history (Tansey, 2007).

The scope of the research is narrowly focused on university education, and does not consider college education, which followed a different developmental pathway in northern Manitoba. This article seeks to contribute to the literature pertaining to the development of university education in northern Canada, describing and analyzing the IUS model for expanding higher education northward. The article also contributes to a deeper understanding of Manitoba’s system of university education, providing, for the first time, a detailed examination of IUS.

## **Findings**

IUS’s beginnings were humble, originating in 1969-70 when a single University of Winnipeg psychology course was offered in the City of Thompson, Manitoba, in partnership with, and funded by, the local school division. Delivery of this one course led to involvement by all southern universities in the delivery of higher education in the North (Blonar, 1989; UGC, 1989; Waines, 1978). Considerable impetus was given to the project when in 1970 the provincial government’s planning and priorities committee, supported by the president of Brandon University, proposed a series of special projects designed to “increase

human potential through educational change in Manitoba” by reducing barriers to university education in northern Manitoba through establishing university extension activities (Waines, 1978, p. 5).

As a result of this government support, Brandon University, the University of Winnipeg, and the University of Manitoba established a joint office in the Town of The Pas, Manitoba. In September 1970, six university courses were scheduled in Thompson, Churchill, and Cranberry Portage, offered independently by each institution through their respective continuing education units. To ensure an efficient and effective approach, the three institutions worked together on course delivery, credit transfer, communicating admissions requirements, and shared revenues and losses. The next year, in 1971-72, twelve courses were offered in six communities. Funding of \$25,000 was provided by Manitoba’s Department of Youth and Education in each of 1970-71 and 1971-72 (UGC, 1989).

Early success was defined by the reduction of barriers, in particular geographic barriers, as well as the popularity, among northerners themselves, of the idea of university course offerings close to home (Blanar, 1989; Waines, 1978). The success of this early collaboration between the three universities led to a proposal to create IUS (Gregor, 1995; Levin & Letourneau, 1991; University College of the North Implementation Team, 2004; UGC, 1972). Manitoba’s university coordinating agency, the University Grants Commission (UGC), accepted the proposal and provided a funding envelope of \$90,350 in 1972-73, IUS’s first formal year of operations (UGC, 1973).

### *Administrative Operations*

Between 1972-73 and 2021-22, IUS delivered university courses in forty-three different northern communities and saw tens of thousands of individual course registrations. Other projects and initiatives managed by IUS added to the number of course registrations and communities served throughout the years. The following section presents organizational features of IUS supporting these outcomes.

**Governance.** IUS initially reported to the Committee of Presidents of the Universities of Manitoba (COPUM) (Blanar, 1989). In 1977, and lasting into the 1990s, a senior university officer reported to COPUM and was responsible for IUS. A steering committee, the Inter Universities North Program Executive Committee (IUNPEC), composed of the senior university officer, the director of IUS, and a representative from each partner university oversaw administrative and academic operations (Blanar, 1989; UGC, 1989). Institutional representatives serving on IUNPEC were the continuing education deans or directors at each university (UGC, 1996).

In 1995-96, the IUNPEC steering committee was expanded to include the committee of vice-presidents, who replaced the dean/director representatives (UGC, 1996), and in 2005 the body was renamed the Inter Universities Advisory Committee (IUAC) when University College of the North (UCN) became the administrator of IUS (IUAC, 2020). Interview participants confirmed that reporting to COPUM, the committee of university presidents, was discontinued perhaps as early as 1999, with the reporting relationship resting between the IUS administrator—who was a senior executive from UCN—and the president of UCN.

**Government Oversight.** After the dissolution of UGC, the University Grants Commission, in 1996-97, official government reporting on IUS waned, no longer appearing in the annual reports of the UGC successor agency, the Council on Post-Secondary Education (COPSE). While data on course locations were reported in COPSE’s statistical compendium until 2014, the last year the compendium was published, there is a sixteen-year gap in registration data from 1997-98 to 2011-12 inclusive. Further, while IUS funding continued, it was not reported separately by the government after 2003-04.

**Strategic Planning.** In his 1978 review of IUS, Waines observed that, while IUS always had a strong operational and administrative focus, its strategic focus was unclear. The forty years since Waines’s report did not see this fact change significantly. While operationally IUS continued to be well-managed, there was no evidence of strategic planning until UCN assumed administrative responsibility for IUS in 2005. Further, interviewees described IUS planning, including planning for which courses to deliver, as being “organic,” relying on requests from communities, an assessment of students’ needs, and filling course requirements for degree programs such as nursing. After 2005, the Inter Universities Advisory Committee’s formal planning focused on day-to-day operations and future options (Cec Hanec & Associates, Inc., 2012; Tyler & Foy, 2009). Planning was also undertaken for the integration of IUS operations into UCN, which was to include the discontinuance of IUS as a separate entity—something that did not ultimately occur, as will be discussed later. IUS thus existed in this odd situation where its steering committee, the IUAC, was planning for the termination of IUS while, along with the University College of the North, it was also planning for continuing IUS activity (UCN Implementation Team, 2004; UCN, 2010a, 2012, 2015a, 2015b, 2018, 2020).

**Administration.** Initially, administrative duties associated with IUS were shared among the three partner universities (Gregor, 1995; UGC, 1978; Waines, 1978). Beginning in 1978-79, and continuing to the present day, IUS was managed from an office in Thompson. While records prior to 1978-79 are unavailable (Waines, 1978), after 1978-79, IUS was staffed by a director, a community



program coordinator, and an administrative secretary. Volunteer community coordinators, recruited based on their interest and commitment to increasing access to education and their own experiences, assisted with the determination of course needs, communicated opportunities to potential students, and helped to coordinate course logistics in communities where courses were delivered (UGC, 1978, 1989).

In 1978, Brandon University took over the responsibility for IUS's administration, library, registration, finances, and so on, an arrangement that was intended to be interim but continued beyond the two-year trial period (UGC, 1978). Individual universities offering the courses were responsible for hiring instructors, and IUS made travel and accommodations arrangements, as required, since instructors tended to travel from Winnipeg or Brandon to the teaching location (Blonar, 1989). By 1995-96, the office supporting IUS in Thompson had grown to include twenty-two full- and part-time staff positions, including an executive director, six academic support staff, and five administrative staff. Rounding out the staff complement were staff associated with the First Year by Distance Education (FYDE) program, which was managed through IUS from 1990-91 to 1997-98, and was funded through dedicated funding provided by UGC, the University Grants Commission (Levin & LeTourneau, 1991). FYDE operated with full-time coordinators and part-time assistants located in each of five sites operating in 1995-96, for a total of ten additional full- and part-time staff positions (UGC, 1996). By 2012-13, the FYDE initiative had been separated from IUS and relocated to Brandon University, and the size of IUS's administrative staff had declined to just two and a half staff members: a manager, an administrative assistant, and a half-time academic advisor/counsellor. IUS continues to operate with this administrative support structure today, supported since 2005 by UCN in the form of enrolment services staff, as well as support through human resources, financial, and other general administrative services (IUS, 2019-20).

### *Academic Operations*

The academic purposes of IUS are to deliver “university level programming in direct response to individual and community-based needs throughout UCN's two campuses ... as well as [regional sites] ... Typically, the elective courses offered through IUS will be from faculties that UCN has not yet established, i.e. [sic] Psychology, Political Science, etc.” (IUS, 2019-20, p. 6). The model used by IUS is one where “each university accepts for credit, as its own, *all* courses offered by [IUS]. In addition, these courses fulfil the residency requirements for the degree taken” (UGC, 1989, pp. 11-12, emphasis in original). IUS's model is one that is simpler than the typical credit transfer process offered by universities (Levin & LeTourneau, 1991). Credit transfer arrangements are authorized by each

participating university, and equivalencies are managed by IUS administrative staff (IUS, 2019-20).

Between 1971-72 and 1985-86, IUS offered courses through traditional face-to-face instruction. Training was “usually in the form of ‘fly-in’ classes conducted by university faculty” with transferability facilitated amongst the three universities (Gregor, 1995, p. 10). Beginning in 1985-86, IUS added teleconferencing as a course delivery method (UGC, 1989). The expectation was that teleconferencing would increase the numbers of courses and communities served (UGC, 1989); however, and for reasons that are not clear, such increases failed to materialize. The year before the adoption of teleconferencing, in 1984-85, IUS delivered courses in fifteen communities, falling to thirteen communities in 1985-86, and delivery did not increase above fifteen communities until 1991-92 when the number of communities served was seventeen. IUS was slow to adopt remote learning, and interviewees were clear that IUS has always operated from the perspective that it primarily delivers instruction on a face-to-face basis. A more formal, albeit time-limited, foray into distance learning waited until the beginning of the 1990s (Levin & LeTourneau, 1991). This is discussed in more detail in the next section.

### *Crisis and Change*

IUS’s fifty-year history is marked with changes and crises that have informed its evolution, summarized below.

**IUS’s First Existential Crisis: 1978.** As part of a general budget reduction, the Government of Manitoba announced the elimination of IUS in 1978, with the final year of operations planned for 1978-79 (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012; UGC, 1978; Waines, 1978). Funding of \$67,100 was provided to manage wind-down activities (UGC, 1978; Waines, 1978), and a reduced grant of \$90,000 was provided in 1978-79 (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012).

The reaction from northern Manitoba regarding the government’s unexpected decision to eliminate IUS was swift and negative (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012; UGC, 1978), perceived “as just another item of neglect ... by the South, and by Winnipeg in particular” (Waines, 1978, p. 1). After much criticism of government by northern Manitobans, the UGC consented to continue the program, allocating an additional \$30,000 to the \$90,000 already earmarked for 1978-79 (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012; UGC, 1978). In the wake of the outcry, a review of IUS was commissioned and led by W. J. Waines, a former provost at the University of Manitoba. Waines was tasked with assessing the mandate of IUS, its accomplishments and current needs, and with making recommendations about its future (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012). Waines’s report focused on meeting the needs of northerners and noted that northerners would “raise hell” if IUS were not restored (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012, p. 32; Waines, 1978, p. 3).

Noting that Waines concluded that “[IUS] was the only rational way to serve the North educationally,” the UGC accepted all of the recommendations in the report (UGC, 1978, p. 8; Waines, 1978, p. 23). In the year immediately after the crisis, IUS funding increased to \$250,000 (UGC, 1978). In subsequent years, funding continued to increase, with grant increases of 8.0% in the 1980-81 fiscal year, 13.7% in 1981-82, 17.2% in 1982-83, and 6.5% in 1983-84 (UGC, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983). IUS had survived its first existential crisis, along the way revealing that northerners saw it as vital to providing access to university courses in their communities (Blonar, 1989).

*Distance Education: 1990-91 to 1997-98.* First Year by Distance Education (FYDE) was established in 1990 by the UGC as a pilot project and was managed as an offshoot of IUS (Campus Manitoba, 2020; Levin & LeTourneau, 1991). IUS’s involvement was pragmatic, taking “advantage of [IUS’s] existing expertise, networks, and working relationships with universities” (quoted in Levin & LeTourneau, 1991).

While styled as a distance education effort, the FYDE model incorporated physical centres where students attended courses delivered to those centres using distance technologies (UGC, 1991). FYDE was not designed to be solely a northern program, delivering in its first year of operation courses in the North, including Cranberry Portage, Flin Flon, The Pas, and Thompson, but also in the southern Manitoba communities of Dauphin and Russell (UGC, 1991). After 1997-98, the responsibility for FYDE transitioned to Brandon University, and in 1998-99, First Year by Distance Education was renamed Campus Manitoba (Campus Manitoba, 2020). In its last year of operations associated with IUS, FYDE continued operating in the same six communities, and in 1997-98 added Swan River, a community 100 kilometres south of Manitoba’s 53<sup>rd</sup> parallel (COPSE, 1998).

*A New Home: 1993.* The 1993 University Education Review Commission recommended that “Keewatin Community College become the comprehensive post-secondary education and training coordinator for the North ... including courses and programs offered through [IUS]” (University Education Review Commission, 1993, pp. 53–54). While the Government of Manitoba accepted this recommendation in 1994 (Mannes, 1994), transition to UCN began in 2004 and was finalized in July 2005 (UCN, 2005).

*Preparatory Programming: 1995-96.* Many northern Manitobans do not have the typical academic preparation for success in higher education (Ferris, 1989). Preparatory programming has been proven to help people succeed where the normal trajectory of education has failed (Ferris, 1989). With such findings in mind, starting in 1995-96, IUS partnered with Keewatin Community College to offer the Transition Year Program (TYP) in the northern communities

of Nelson House, Norway House, and Split Lake (UGC, 1996). The TYP supported a full-time cohort of up to twenty-five students each in three or four communities annually, offering preparation courses for higher education study. It was anticipated that the program would cycle through different communities in every year or every second year (UGC, 1996). The TYP continued until 2004 when the funding, which supported six faculty members, was reallocated by UCN to support the creation of arts degree programming (Faculty of Arts, Business, and Science, n.d.; UCN, 2005). The termination of the TYP program was not well received by northern communities, and a 2009 needs assessment documented the desire of communities for a return to this kind of program (Tyler & Foy, 2009). As will be seen, communities had to wait until 2020 before such programming re-emerged under the IUS umbrella.

*IUS's Second Existential Crisis: 2004.* IUS faced its second existential crisis between 2004 and 2013. This crisis was rooted in the establishment of University College of the North, whose first strategic plan stated: "As UCN develops its degree programming, it will offer a range of undergraduate courses. It is recommended that as UCN phases in its degree programs [IUS] will be phased out" (University College of the North Implementation Team, 2004, p. 28). Yet, planning IUS's phase-out was slow, with a timeline for transition created only in 2007-08 (UCN, 2008). Three years later, in 2010, a concept paper was prepared to manage the phase-out, and, at the same time, the initiative's name changed from Inter Universities *North* to Inter Universities *Services* (UCN, 2010b). In 2013, the date of the phase-out was extended from 2013 to 2016, and the Inter Universities Advisory Committee committed to reviewing IUS in 2015 (UCN, 2013).

Interviewees in this study identified three factors that contributed to the reversal of plans to phase out IUS. First was the fact that UCN and the government never undertook discussions regarding IUS funding staying with degree programming in northern Manitoba, meaning that basic elements of the wind-down were never initiated. Second, standing administrative arrangements around credit transfer simplified the University of Manitoba's Northern Social Work Program, which relied heavily on courses offered by UCN to fulfill elective requirements. The dissolution of IUS would mean that each social work student would have to complete multiple requests for credit transfer from UCN in each term, and thus the social work program objected to the phase-out. Finally, UCN's arts degree development, which includes English, history, Native studies (now called Aboriginal and northern studies), and sociology, could not support electives in northern degree programs that required sciences, math, statistics, and other courses not offered by UCN. While it was well funded to support stipendiary teaching appointments, IUS's funding envelope could not support salaries for the number of faculty required for IUS to offer the breadth of courses to support

existing northern degree programs, nor could UCN offer its own degrees without support from IUS. As a result, by 2014, plans to discontinue IUS were abandoned, and any reference to the phase-out of IUS disappeared from UCN's official reports (UCN, 2014). IUS had survived its second existential crisis.

**Student Outreach: 2016.** An outreach program supported by IUS was offered for the first time beginning in May and June 2017 to give Grade 4 and 5 students exposure to math and science at UCN's campus in Thompson (Darbyson, 2017). The eight-week program, called "UCNrich," was funded through IUS (UCN, 2017). The program was offered for just a single year.

**Preparatory Programming Returns: 2020.** Acknowledging the 2009 observation that the high school experience in many northern communities does not prepare students well for further education (Tyler & Foy, 2009), beginning in 2020 the Inter Universities Advisory Committee approved a change in its terms of reference that added to its responsibilities offering "preparation courses to help prepare students for success in university courses" (IUAC, 2020, p. 1). Implementation of preparatory programming began immediately, albeit slowed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### *Inputs, Outputs, and Outcomes*

Available data provides additional insights into the operation of IUS throughout its fifty-year history. The following presents data associated with funding, communities served, registration, courses delivered, student success, and partner university participation.

**Funding.** IUS began with a modest grant of \$90,350 in 1972-73 to support nineteen university course sections in six northern communities. Five decades later, in 2021-22, IUS received more than \$1,000,000 to support thirty-seven courses delivered in four communities. While government funding can always be a challenge, the nature of IUS's services is scalable, and course delivery can be adjusted to the funding available. Funding for IUS has not been a barrier to operations.

**Course Registrations by Community.** Throughout its history, IUS has operated in a total of forty-three different communities. Figure 1 shows the numbers of communities served in each of the fifty years of IUS operations compared to the number of annual course registrations. While there appears to be a cycle of growth and decline in communities served throughout the period, notable is the significant decline in the number of communities after 1999-00. In the twenty-eight years ending in 1999-00, IUS delivered courses in an average of 12.2 communities annually, whereas in the twenty-two years after 2000-01, IUS delivered to an average of just seven communities each year.

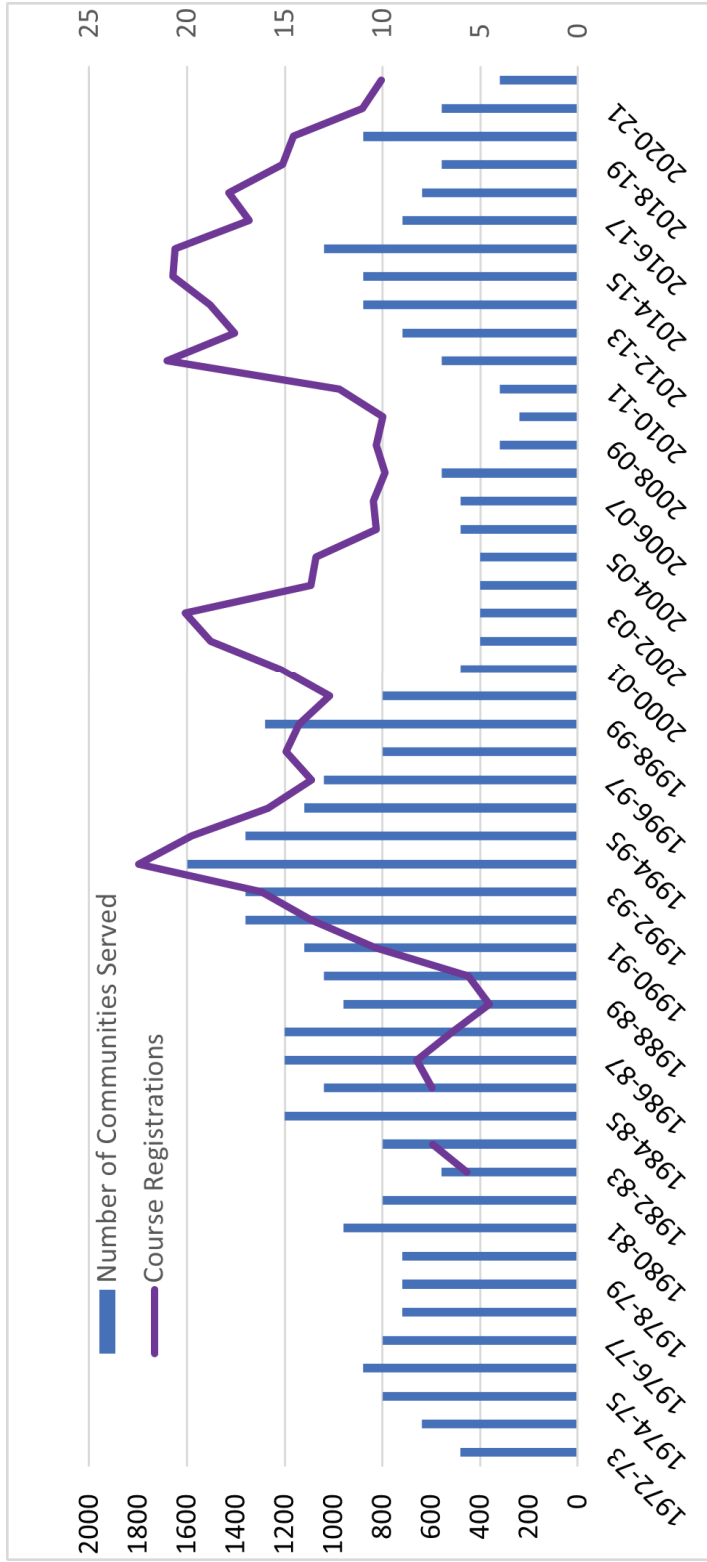


Figure 1. Number of communities served and course registrations at Inter Universities Services, 1972-73 to 2021-22.  
 Source: Universities Grants Commission; University College of the North

Given their status as the two major centres in northern Manitoba, it is natural that Thompson and The Pas would be a focus of IUS activity. However, IUS was designed to bring university education to where people live, and there is an expectation that courses will be offered in multiple communities. In 1972-73, 42.1% of all courses were offered in Thompson and The Pas, with 57.9% of courses offered in other, smaller northern communities. Fifty years later, in 2021-22, fully 86% of courses were offered in Thompson and The Pas, with only 13.9% of courses offered in other communities. As will be seen below, this is the result of shifting the focus to offer courses supporting northern degree programs in education, social work, and nursing.

Course registrations also followed cycles of growth and decline. Beginning in 1985-86, when data are consistently available, until 1990-91, there was an annual average of 992.5 course registrations, but for the period from 1991-92 to 2021-22, IUS saw an annual average of 1,252 course registrations. As will be discussed below, this phenomenon is in part a result of IUS's growing support of professional programs—particularly nursing, teaching, and social work—offered in northern Manitoba by southern universities, and concentrated in the larger centres of Thompson and The Pas.

While the annual average number of communities served by IUS declined after 1999-00, the annual average number of course registrations increased significantly. Registration drop-offs accelerated after the 2018-19 academic year, attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic that saw many communities closed to non-residents, and because universities restricted travel for faculty and staff. It remains to be seen if and how course registrations will recover after the pandemic.

**Student Profile.** Available data on students registering in IUS courses throughout its fifty years is inconsistent, an artifact, perhaps, of these students being recorded in the statistics of each individual university, and not being identified separately. Available statistics in IUS's most recent decade suggest that students were mostly female (a low of 79% to a high of 84%) and tended to be 25 years of age or older (between 50% and 60%). These findings are generally consistent with enrolment statistics for university courses offered by UCN outside of the IUS mechanism over the last decade.

**Course Sections Offered.** In IUS's first year of full operation, 1972-73, Brandon University offered seven courses, as did University of Manitoba, and the University of Winnipeg offered five. Courses were in the disciplines of anthropology, economics, education, English, geography, history, and sociology (UGC, 1973). By 2021-22, and acknowledging the sixteen-year gap in course data, at least 1,640 course sections have been offered in at least forty different disciplinary areas.

Course sections offered through IUS have changed considerably since 1972-23. Figure 2 shows the proportion of courses by academic grouping over the thirty-four-year period where data are available. While social sciences and education courses were mainstays of IUS in the first 24 years, accounting for 47.7% and 25.0% respectively of all courses offered, in the ten years from 2012-13 to 2021-22, social sciences had declined to 30.2% of all courses, with no education courses offered. The prevalence of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) courses increased significantly in the last ten years of IUS operations compared to previous years.

Table 1 shows these academic groupings in two twelve-year time periods and one ten-year time period to help show how course offerings have changed over time. Early on, courses in the social sciences dominated course offerings, but they were overtaken by STEM courses in the most recent decade of operations.

The complete disappearance of education is intriguing given its prominence in IUS course offerings earlier in the program's history. Indeed, while longitudinal data are not available, Waines (1978) noted that between 1972-73 and 1976-77, between 34.9 and 62.5 of IUS registrants each year were teachers, depending on the year in question. The drop-off in education courses can, for the last ten years at least, be explained by the 2012-13 absorption into UCN of the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP). While teachable courses in humanities, social sciences, and STEM fields continued to be offered through IUS, after 2012-13 all education courses were offered through UCN directly, and not through IUS.

Table 1. Changes in courses offered by Inter Universities Services

Grouping	First 12 years	Second 12 Years	Last 10 Years	All Years
	1972-73 to 1983-84 (%)	1984-85 to 1995-96 (%)	2012-13 to 2021-22 (%)	
Business	0.8	6.0	0.0	2.6
Education	30.0	22.1	0.0	15.6
Humanities	14.3	5.1	0.0	8.4
Social Sciences	46.9	48.1	30.2	42.5
STEM	6.6	13.9	51.2	22.9
Other	1.3	4.8	18.6	8.1
Total	23.0%	39.5%	37.5%	100%

Sources: UGC Annual Reports 1972-73 to 1995-96; IUS Statistical Reports 2012-13 to 2021-22  
Following UCN's categorization, history courses are considered humanities, and Native studies courses are considered social sciences.



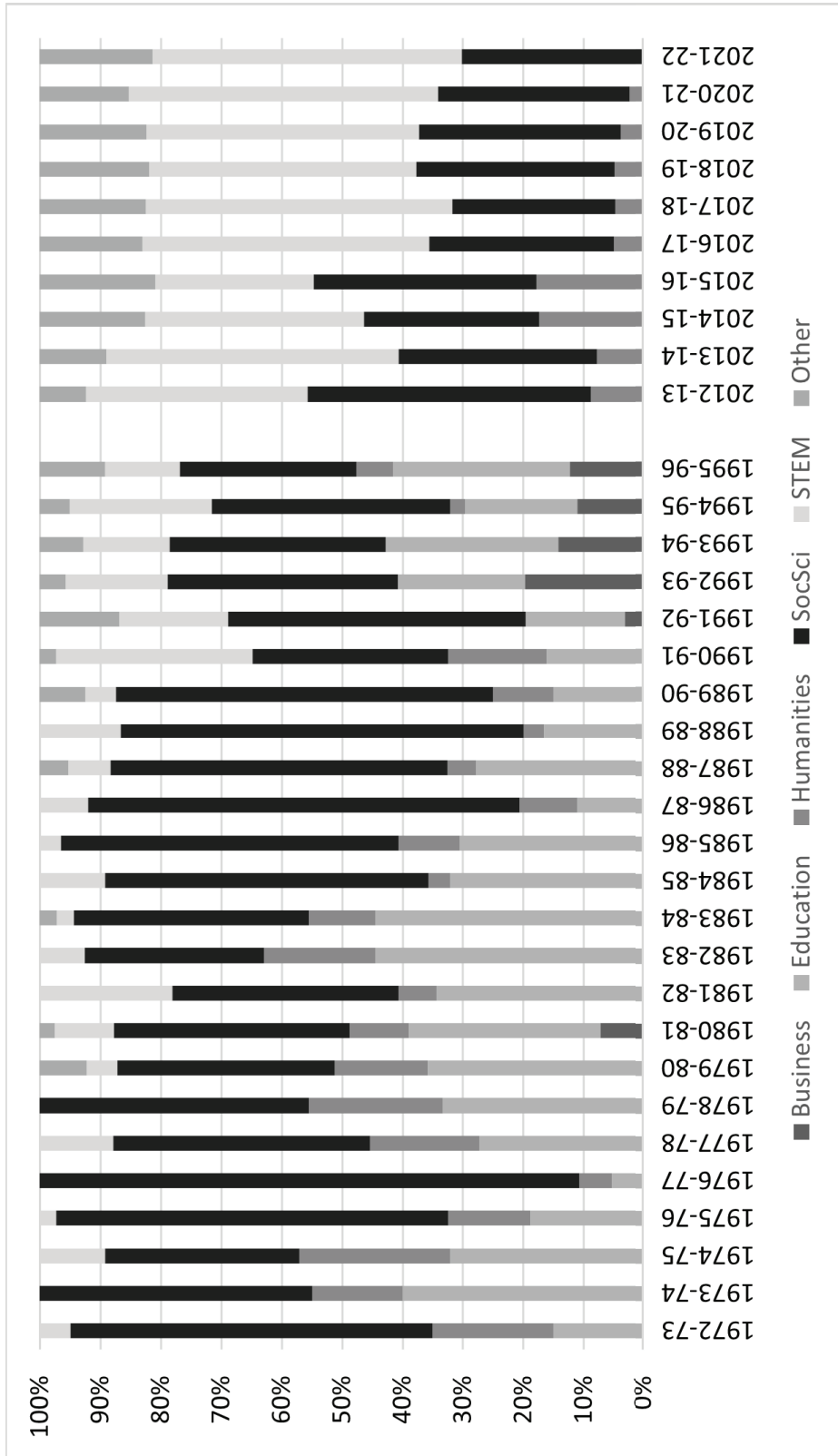


Figure 2. Proportion of IUS courses taught by grouping 1972-73 to 2020-21 (with a sixteen-year data gap)

Perhaps most interesting is the growth of STEM courses. Between 1972-73 and 1995-96, STEM courses accounted for just 11.2% of all courses offered, but between 2012-13 and 2021-22, such courses accounted for 42.3% of all courses offered. The growth of STEM courses after 1990-91 is accounted for by the northern Bachelor of Nursing program offered by the University of Manitoba, with IUS providing many course requirements and electives. Further, in 2010, UCN began offering a diploma program leading to a licensed practical nursing certification in the northern region. While not typical for college-level programs, university science and math courses form part of that diploma program and indeed are the same courses offered in support of the University of Manitoba's Bachelor of Nursing program—and are the same courses that have been offered through IUS. While the “Other” grouping is mostly a collection of other kinds of courses (e.g., music, fine arts) offered through IUS, more recently, courses from other disciplines have been offered through IUS to support the University of Manitoba's Northern Social Work program.

Given the fact that the IUS's operating model is one that offers courses and not programs, it is difficult to draw conclusions when looking at course section data. Generally speaking, it may be that in the early part of its existence, IUS offered a variety of first- and second-year courses to help individuals launch academic careers, pursue personal interests, and achieve other objectives important to them and their communities. It may also be assumed that throughout its existence, IUS has also supported students pursuing teacher education, first through BUNTEP, and then through UCN, by offering the arts and science courses that are part of Bachelor of Education programs. Students may also have taken courses supporting the University of Manitoba's Northern Social Work program, operating in Thompson since 1983. Additionally, the data also show that students took STEM courses, and perhaps humanities and social science electives, in support of northern nursing programs. Aside from these known reasons and given the large number of course registrations in general subjects, which themselves are requirements for many different programs, it is difficult to ascertain with certainty why students enrolled in particular courses throughout IUS's history.

How IUS determines which courses to offer in any given year does not help to clarify matters. One interviewee for this study outlined four considerations that IUS has used throughout its history to determine which courses to offer. First, requests made by communities through surveys and IUS's networks are considered. Second, “we would fill the gaps,” providing courses based on what electives and other courses were needed for a program in a particular year. Third, courses were offered based on those students required in order to graduate. Fourth and finally, practically speaking, courses may (or may not) be offered based on the availability of instructors. IUS's own approach to course delivery was multi-faceted

and allowed students to take courses in a variety of disciplines and locations, and for a variety of reasons.

After the 1990s, however, given the degree programs offered in northern Manitoba by southern universities, IUS appeared to focus heavily on supporting social work, nursing, and teacher education programs, filling gaps in those programs and, after the establishment of University College of the North in 2004, filling gaps in the degree programs offered by that institution. This realized, but unplanned, strategy seemed to be successful given the more than 20% increase in course registrations after 1990-91, despite the decline in the number of communities served over the same time period. It also appeared to have the unintended effect of concentrating activity in larger communities, with most courses being offered in The Pas and Thompson in IUS's most recent decade.

**Course Pass Rates.** Student outcomes data began to be reported by IUS in 2008-09, summarized in Table 2, below. Given IUS's focus on delivering courses rather than programs, course pass rates each year are a useful way to assess student success. However, the challenge with interpreting such data is twofold. First, individual course completion rates are not a common indicator used by institutions in Manitoba, and thus comparisons are difficult. Second, IUS courses are delivered by four different universities, in different communities, and within different program contexts. While pass rates are useful for year-over-year comparison of IUS student success rates, it is difficult to assess meaning in a broader context beyond noting that between 60% and 72% of IUS students successfully passed their courses.

Table 2. Student course pass rates, Inter-University Services

Year	Pass Rate (%)	Year	Pass Rate (%)
2008-09	61.3	2015-16	70.6
2009-10	64.0	2016-17	68.6
2010-11	65.4	2017-18	67.6
2011-12	68.8	2018-19	72.4
2012-13	67.0	2019-20	72.7
2013-14	64.7	2020-21	65.9
2014-15	59.9	2021-22	68.7

Source: IUS Statistical Reports. Pass rate = number of courses passed/course registrations.

**Partner University Participation.** Tables 3 and 4 show the number and proportion of courses delivered by each partner university where data are available. Before the 2004 establishment of University College of the North, both Brandon University and the University of Manitoba offered an average of nineteen courses per year in IUS's first twenty-four years (see Table 3). The University of Winnipeg offered an average of just under eight courses annually in the same time frame. While the University of Winnipeg never offered the most courses in a given year, prior to 1995-96 there were five years that it offered the second-highest proportion of courses amongst the three partner universities—1978-79, 1980-81, 1981-82, 1987-88 (tie), and 1989-90.

Table 4 shows the proportion of courses offered by partner universities for the ten years starting in 2012-13. Between 2012-13 and 2021-22, the proportion of courses offered by the University of Manitoba grew from 40.0% to 54.1%, whereas Brandon University declined from 21.3% to 10.8%, and UCN declined from 34.7% to 29.7%. The only other institution showing any proportional growth was the University of Winnipeg, growing slightly from 4.0% to 5.4%.

Konrad & Small (1986) report considerable benefits to consortia arrangements in higher education, but also note that such arrangements may suffer from an unequal commitment by all partners, leading to problems in the consortium. While the imbalance in the number of courses offered has been noted by the IUAC (the Inter Universities Advisory Committee) from time to time, it has not led to strife. Indeed, interview participants revealed that there has been little conflict among the institutions throughout IUS's history. Issues such as differing course contributions, disagreements about credit transfer, and general questions about IUS, often associated with new members of IUAC getting their bearings, were resolved amicably at the IUAC table. This reflects one interview participant's perspective that the IUAC members themselves were well-meaning; indeed, at one meeting of the IUAC, a member described IUS as a "labour of love," referring to supporting northern university education in general and supporting UCN specifically. Such experiences suggest that, in addition to the educational services provided to northern communities, one of the chief outcomes of IUS has been the creation of a positive, long-term framework for collaboration between the partner universities regarding higher education in northern Manitoba.

Table 3. Inter University Services course sections by university, 1972-73 to 1995-96

Year	Proportion of Total Sections Taught (%)			Total Sections (#)
	Brandon University	University of Manitoba	University of Winnipeg	
1972-73	36.8	36.8	26.3	19
1973-74	33.3	47.6	19.0	21
1974-75	35.7	46.4	17.9	28
1975-76	45.7	28.6	25.7	35
1976-77	32.4	37.8	29.7	37
1977-78	46.9	34.4	18.8	32
1978-79	46.2	19.2	34.6	26
1979-80	36.8	44.7	18.4	38
1980-81	11.9	57.1	31.0	42
1981-82	18.8	53.1	28.1	32
1982-83	30.0	53.3	16.7	30
1983-84	18.9	73.0	8.1	37
1984-85	46.6	29.3	24.1	58
1985-86	33.3	54.0	12.7	63
1986-87	30.8	47.7	21.5	65
1987-88	32.7	34.5	32.7	55
1988-89	30.0	43.3	26.7	30
1989-90	23.1	51.3	25.6	39
1990-91 <sup>1</sup>	35.1	43.2	21.6	37
1991-92	57.4	31.1	11.5	61
1992-93	57.7	42.3	0.0	71
1993-94	64.9	33.0	2.1	94
1994-95	61.7	33.3	4.9	81
1995-96 <sup>2</sup>	53.8	41.5	4.6	65
Total	41.9%	41.5%	16.6%	1,096

Sources: Universities Grants Commission Annual Reports 1972-73 to 1995-96. Percentage calculations by author.

Notes:

1. The First Year by Distance Education (FYDE) program began in 1990/91 as a three-year pilot program operated by IUS. Courses offered through FYDE are not included in the count for IUS.

2. Data unavailable for the 16 years from 1996-97 to 2011-12.

Table 4. IUS Course Sections by University, 2012-13 to 2021-22

Year	Proportion of Sections Taught (%)				Total Sections Taught (#)
	Brandon University	University College of the North	University of Manitoba	University of Winnipeg	
2012-13	21.3	34.7	40.0	4.0	75
2013-14	18.8	31.3	37.5	12.5	64
2014-15	20.3	33.3	36.2	10.1	69
2015-16	17.9	44.0	27.4	10.7	84
2016-17	13.6	27.1	45.8	13.6	59
2017-18	22.2	25.4	42.9	9.5	63
2018-19	20.3	22.0	57.6	3.4	59
2019-20	13.7	29.4	52.9	3.9	51
2020-21	19.5	17.1	61.0	7.3	41
2021-22	14.0	23.3	58.1	4.7	43
Total	18.3%	29.9%	43.6%	8.2%	612

Source: IUS. Percentage calculations by author.

### Assessing the Value Added by IUS;

This research has highlighted the value added to Manitoba’s post-secondary system by IUS. Findings fell into four general categories, the first and perhaps most obvious being accessibility. IUS was designed primarily to provide students with opportunities to pursue university education closer to home (Marchant & Mitchell, 2012; Waines, 1978). IUS has made higher education accessible to northerners in Manitoba, including delivering individual courses, and filling course gaps in complete university programs delivered in northern Manitoba.

Second, IUS helped to build relationships with northern and First Nations communities and higher education—often offering people their first opportunity to take university courses, as well as contributing to local social and economic development. In so doing, IUS created a network of communities involved in higher education, laying a foundation for the teacher education, nursing, and social work degree programs that were later established in northern Manitoba, and indeed creating those community networks upon which FYDE, the First Year by Distance Education program, relied when established in 1990, and that UCN continues to rely upon today in its regional network of community campuses.

Third, IUS helped to build relationships among universities in Manitoba through structured cooperation. Indeed, the absence of significant conflict observed was explained by one interviewee as the product of collegial discussion by IUAC of issues as they arose, without necessarily having to refer those issues

to higher bodies within any of the partner institutions. All interviewees spoke of the good intentions of all the institutions, and the members of IUAC, to work toward solutions to ensure continued delivery of university education in northern Manitoba. This finding is consistent with Blonar's (1989) observation regarding the dedication of all individuals involved in IUS as being a key part of its success.

Further, the collaborative relationship inherent with the IUS model also helped to lend stability and legitimacy to UCN in its first years as a degree-granting institution, creating a framework within which programs could be rolled out with the support of more well-established universities. One interviewee noted that IUS presented a framework to help "support UCN's identity and legitimacy ... and to ... establish myself as a competent administrator with my peers."

Finally, interviewees agreed that the flexibility of IUS was a significant strength of the model. This flexibility is reflected in both the structure of IUS, as well as an administrative informality that evolved over time. As described in greater detail above, IUS's structure helps to ensure that students do not face barriers associated with, among other things, residency requirements, credit transfer, or visiting student status. This provides students with greater flexibility, giving them a broad array of course options, and allowing them to stay in their home communities, at least for a period of time, to pursue university education.

The degree of administrative informality that evolved helped IUS through changes over its fifty-year history; flexibility has been key to adaptation. While there are certainly established, written, and well-managed procedures around credit transfer, visiting student status, and other critical processes, any formal, written agreement that may have existed in 1972-73 amongst the partner universities has been lost to time, but without much apparent concern from those partner universities; IUS operations and partner university relationships evolved as needed by changing circumstances.

Administrative informality is also observed in the inconsistent approach to planning, described by one interviewee as "planning as we went along." The selection of communities served and courses to be delivered was tactical, based on factors described above, and not based on a strategic plan mapping out the development of higher education in northern Manitoba.

Ultimately, the principal value added by IUS has been to provide increased access to university education in northern Manitoba. In so doing, IUS has been a framework to support the development of relationships between northern communities, programs, and among Manitoba's universities. In pursuing these values, IUS sought to be flexible, adopting informal approaches focused on achieving outcomes, which, as one interviewee explained, meant that IUS could "operate under the radar" to accomplish more than might have been possible otherwise.

## Conclusion

This article has examined Manitoba's approach to delivering university education in the North, reflecting the shared understanding that the challenges to the delivery of higher education in northern regions requires different ways of doing things. Adding to the panoply of models used to deliver university education in the Provincial North, IUS is unique in that it is a consortium of the degree-granting institutions in Manitoba that provides course delivery in many different communities.

The research into northern university education is not robust, and there are many other avenues open for inquiry. Future research into the delivery of university education in northern Canada could examine the educational outcomes associated with differing approaches, to determine if some models have been more successful than others. Other research could consider the experiences of northerners in southern institutions, including comparisons to the experiences from other northern jurisdictions. Similarly, future research could also look into students' perspectives on the various different northern approaches. Other interesting areas could include consideration of socio-economic changes on enrolment in northern university programs. In Manitoba, additional research could also be undertaken regarding the history of Keewatin Community College, and the development of other university programs, such as the Brandon University Northern Teacher Education Program (BUNTEP) and its intersection with IUS.

Throughout its fifty years, Inter Universities Services contributed significantly, albeit in an unplanned way, to the evolution of university education in northern Manitoba. First delivering individual university courses in northern communities, IUS expanded its role to include filling course gaps in the degree programming that was introduced in the North by southern Manitoba universities. When a stand-alone institution, the University College of the North (UCN), was introduced, IUS had laid a foundation for understanding university education within northern communities, and provided, and continues to provide, courses that support UCN's degree programming. Despite IUS's humble beginnings and its sometimes-precarious existence, the growth and success of university education in northern Manitoba has been inextricably linked to IUS.

Northerners in Manitoba have reason to be optimistic about the future of university education in the province's northern region, and in particular about the role that IUS will play in that future. A 2022 strategic planning exercise undertaken by the Inter Universities Advisory Committee more formally incorporated academic preparation of students so as to help them succeed in



the courses offered and the programs supported by IUS. Additionally, IUAC has committed returning to more communities in future academic years. Communities themselves are looking to learning technology to augment access, strengthening connections between northern communities and Manitoba universities, further solidifying IUS as a critical part of university education in northern Manitoba.

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