

# InfoNorth

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## Enriching Canada's Health Research Landscape with Inuit Knowledge, Methods, and Transformative Spaces: Ten Policy and Practice Recommendations from Nunavut

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### INTRODUCTION

**I**MAGINE A PLACE WHERE INUIT KNOWLEDGE, critical thought, open dialogue, and innovation are the foundation of scholarship and graduate training for new and upcoming Inuit researchers. Where the brilliant minds of the Nunavut Network Environment for Indigenous Health Research (NEIHR)'s communities could convene to help shape the brilliant minds of the future. This is the vision for the Nunavut NEIHR at the Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre in Iqaluit, Nunavut. In its first four years of operation (2019–23), the Nunavut NEIHR has supported Inuit students and researchers to elevate Inuit epistemologies and methodologies into their scholarly activities. In this paper, we share our observations and knowledge gained from this unique learning environment that is grounded in Inuit ways of knowing, and we share 10 policy and practice recommendations for consideration.

### WHAT IS A NEIHR?

The NEIHR Program at “the Canadian Institutes of Health Research supports health research that addresses the specific health needs of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, and aims to improve the health of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Peoples through the assertion of Indigenous understandings of health and by fostering innovative community-based and scientifically excellent research” (CIHR, 2021). This includes developing strategies to strengthen Indigenous research capacity “through training and mentoring along the entire career continuum from undergraduate to postdoctoral levels” (CIHR, 2021). The NEIHR Program “has been developed to address those needs in capacity development, research, and knowledge translation” (CIHR, 2021) over 16 years. The NEIHR Program is led by the Institute of Indigenous Peoples' Health.

The Nunavut NEIHR is one of 10 programs that were funded across Canada in 2020. It is the first time that the Canadian Institutes of Health Research had funded such a program in the territory of Nunavut.

It is well known in Canada, for example, that northerners face a number of challenging circumstances when it comes to achieving good health. These include: lack of access to services and culturally appropriate care; understaffed health centres (Ferguson, 2017); a transient workforce of health professionals (Ferguson, 2017; Abelesen et al., 2020; Galloway, 2020) serious issues related to mental wellness and addictions (Crawford, n.d.; Young et al., 2015; Gray et al., 2016; Healey et al., 2016; Healey Akearok et al., 2018; Nelson et al., 2018); historical trauma and acculturation (Kral et al., 2011; QIA, 2013; TRCCan, 2015; Pauktutit Women of Canada, 2016); and geographically and politically isolated communities (Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada, 1996). That said, communities have tremendous strengths to address local health concerns, such as practices and values that celebrate collaborations and solution-seeking approaches, traditions and customs that support healthy lifestyles and activity, and strong cultural pride (Annahatak, 2009; Redvers, 2016; Healey, 2017; Mearns, 2017; Healey, et al., 2018). Drawing upon existing community resources and pathways to wellbeing is the key to addressing these challenges now and over the coming years.

For decades we have been vulnerable to a narrative that paints the Nunavut NEIHR's communities in a deficit-based frame of reference. However, the Nunavut NEIHR's collective knowledge, approaches, and philosophies are brilliant. We observe with complete humility that the academic community is enriched by what we are doing. We are innovative. We are intelligent. We are solution-seeking. We belong to Nunavummiut, and Nunavummiut are extraordinary. The Nunavut NEIHR's people are the Nunavut NEIHR's greatest strength, and the academic world values the Nunavut NEIHR's knowledge. The Nunavut NEIHR is a mechanism to help Nunavut communities harness and direct that strength. This paper focuses on the aspects of the program that make it unique in the landscape of graduate training environments and on policy and practice recommendations for the academy.

## METHODS

This study followed the *Piliriqatigiinniq* Community Health Research Model, which privileges Inuit ways of knowing and five values that are central to the Inuit research process: *Piliriqatigiinniq* (working for the common good of community); *Inuuqatigiittiarniq* (being respectful of all human beings); *Unikkaaqatigiinniq* (the power and meaning of story); *Iqqaumaqatigiinniq* (thinking deeply until coming to place of realization); and *Pittiarniq* (being good, kind, ethical) (Healey and Tagak, 2014).

In this study, a comprehensive and culturally grounded approach was employed to explore the outcomes of a transformative graduate learning environment inspired by Inuit pedagogical and epistemological processes (Prior, 2007). The methodology was grounded in collaborative engagement with Inuit communities and aimed to integrate Inuit knowledge systems into a study to understand contemporary graduate education. Data collection included the following:

1. **Documentation and Analysis of Traditional Pedagogy:** We conducted extensive fieldwork, employing observational methods, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews with community members and Elders (Creswell, 2003). This enabled the systematic documentation and analysis of Inuit pedagogical techniques, emphasizing their holistic and experiential nature (NCCAH, 2009).
2. **Pilot Implementation and Continuous Feedback:** The transformed graduate learning environment was piloted in collaboration with Inuit communities (Mearns et al., 2020; Healey Akearok et al., 2023). Ongoing feedback loops were established, allowing for iterative adjustments and refinements based on the lived experiences and perspectives of all stakeholders.

Following the *Piliriqatigiinniq* Community Health Research Model, the thoughts and observations of the individuals interviewed were kept as intact as possible, honouring the lesson shared. *Iqqaumaqatigiinniq* was the analytical process followed to arrive at the findings (Healey, 2018).

## ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout the study, ethical practices followed the *Piliriqatigiinniq* Community Health Research Model and Inuit and community values (Healey and Tagak Sr., 2014). Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and community-led processes were rigorously followed to ensure the respectful and responsible utilization of Inuit knowledge.

## FINDINGS

### *What is unique and enriching in an Inuit health-research training environment?*

At present, the Nunavut NEIHR is in its infancy, just beginning to create a program supporting graduate students and strengthening capacity in research. However, in the early days, a number of observations and contributors to success were shared in this study that reinforced the Nunavut NEIHR's uniqueness in Canada. They are described, below.

**Self-Determination—Independence from the Academic Machine:** The Nunavut NEIHR is one of two NEIHR programs to be housed in an independent community-research institute and not a university. As such, we have freedom to be nimble and responsive without the time-consuming bureaucratic processes that may burden traditional academic institutions.

In the Nunavut NEIHR's context, its trainees and students are engaged in their communities and mobilizing on the ground. The Nunavut NEIHR's remoteness is also an advantage, in that it permits immersive learning and knowledge exchange for the Nunavut NEIHR's learners and scholars far from traditional academic learning environments and immersed in the lands and water that are the foundation of the Inuit worldview.

**Inuit Values, Knowledge, and Pedagogy:** In the academic world, we are often confronted with terminology that identifies us as experts or that privileges the traditional academic over other types of knowledge keepers. In the worldview of our communities, no one can be an expert until reaching Elderhood—and even then, the Elders we hold most dear would never consider themselves experts.

The Nunavut NEIHR's Elder advisors tell us to behave ethically, to be observant, and to pay attention to others, reinforcing the concept that we are always in service to one another. That is the Nunavut NEIHR's assignment in life—to always be learning, always be of service to others, always caring for the wellbeing of others, to be a good human being. The Nunavut NEIHR's Elders have observed that, in their opinion, formal schooling teaches young people how to get a job but not how to be a good human being. They perhaps are highlighting a difference in worldview—we take that lesson to mean that knowledge is for advancing the Nunavut NEIHR's shared humanity, not for advancing the Nunavut NEIHR members' individual careers. Inuit worldviews do not separate research from life. They are intimately intertwined. Can you be a good researcher if you are not a good person? This is the question we are asked from an Inuit knowledge and pedagogical perspective.

Inuit values form the heart of the Nunavut NEIHR, which is grounded in the concepts of *Qaujisarniq*, *Ilinniarniq*, *Pilimmaqsarniq*, *Ajunngitiarlinniq*, and *Pittiarniq*. These concepts guide all aspects of the day-to-day activities and strategic directions of the Nunavut NEIHR Program (Fig. 1).

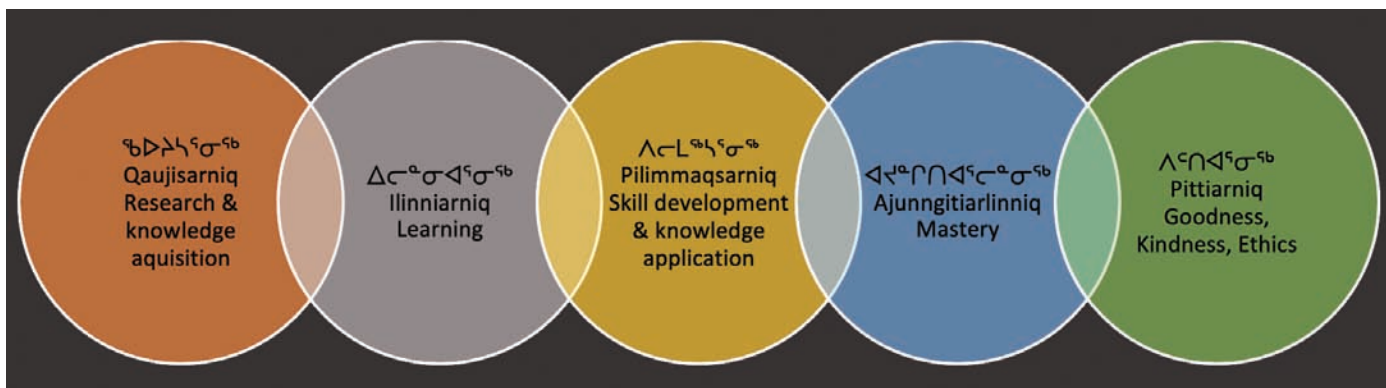


FIG. 1. Inuit values forming the heart of the Nunavut NEIHR's approach to research and learning.

- *Qaujisaarniq* is the concept of knowledge acquisition. Although used to convey the idea of research in English, it is actually a much richer and more complex concept and encompasses knowledge and generational teachings.
- *Ilinniarniq* is the concept of learning, which comes in all forms including storytelling, arts, formal education, ancestral learning, and written instruction.
- *Pilimmaqsarniq* refers to skill development and the application of knowledge through, usually, hands-on experiential learning.
- *Ajunngitiarlinniq* is the concept of mastery. It is an important element of the Nunavut NEIHR because the Nunavut NEIHR's goal is to cultivate a learning and training environment that supports Inuit students and researchers to develop their skills to a level of mastery—to the point that they will be able to experiment on their own and eventually teach others.
- *Pittiarniq* is the concept of being kind or good to one another. It is often used to convey the concept of being ethical in research but is also used in less formal ways, for example, to explain to children that they should be kind and compassionate to one another.

The Nunavut NEIHR's research and knowledge acquisition processes are inherently Inuit, in that they are innovative and adaptive as well as multi-faceted and rigorous.

**Transformative Spaces:** Community wellbeing is centred on people, particularly Elders, but also on children and the youngest members of the community. Community members support each other through informal networks, such as by connecting families with older people who are otherwise alone and through sharing food, which includes but is not limited to local traditional (or country) foods. When the oldest and youngest members of the community are connected, family, nature/land, and food are the highlights.

The Nunavut NEIHR is creating transformative spaces that build on these concepts—which support all types of growth and learning—across paradigms and generations. Land-based learning, Inuit science, traditional Western research methods, Inuit skill development, and

diverse ways of knowing all share space in the Nunavut NEIHR's learning environment. Sharing food, welcoming Elders and children, and laughter and storytelling are components of the day-to-day activities that occur in the Nunavut NEIHR—not as a supplement to the work but as a meaningful part of the knowledge transmission paradigm we live and operate within. This is a welcoming and inclusive space that highlights Inuit values related to *Tunnganarniq* (to be welcoming and inclusive of others) as well as *Atausiuqatauniq* (the oneness of all human beings in relation to one another). It is a space that fosters continuous learning across generations, formally and informally, where knowledge is continuously expanded and explored.

For example, the Nunavut NEIHR recently held a week-long meeting in Iqaluit for post-secondary, graduate, and early-career researchers. The intention of the meeting was to explore ethics, Inuit research methods, and traditional Western research methods. Instructors came from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences—both Northern and Southern. Participants in the meeting engaged in deep and meaningful discussions about Nunavut's research history and legacy in the context of ethics and what it means to behave ethically for Inuit. They also learned about the research currently happening in the territory; learned how to clean fresh sealskins with an Elder instructor; practised developing shared sacred spaces for collecting and sharing narratives with community members; explored Inuit drumming and song with master drummers, as well as the extremely high-level skill involved in interpreting the teachings embedded in old songs; and explored Inuit pedagogical and research methodologies through the teachings of the *qulliq* (Inuit oil lamp).

We believe that the way we develop and structure the Nunavut NEIHR is cultivating transformative spaces that strip away ego and remind us that we are all learners. When we step away from the historically oppressive systems of academia, we thrive in the knowledge of what the Nunavut NEIHR's teachings can provide and what they mean to us in the Nunavut NEIHR's context.

**Action—A Devolved Model:** Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* is often translated as Inuit traditional knowledge. However, it

has no timescale—it refers to Inuit knowledge past, present, and future. Inuit knowledge is not static, it is dynamic. Acquiring the knowledge in Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* enriches research and lives.

Ethical research is grounded in Inuit ways, is observant, and contributes to strengthening connections and learning in the community. When one has developed mastery and becomes knowledgeable, one has a higher degree of responsibility in the community. This means that one has acquired knowledge and skills needed to observe and to pay attention, to understand more of a particular context and translate that into action, and to be responsive to the needs of the community. Building on the responsibility and responsibility of research and knowledge, it becomes imperative, then, to have an action component.

For example, the Aqqiumavvik Society in Arviat, a hub site of the Nunavut NEIHR, has developed an ᐱᑭᑭᑦᑎᑦᑎᑦᑎᑦᑎᑦ *Aajiqatigiingniq* framework, which describes a consensus process for developing and moving forward on decision-making. The framework holds at its heart the best interests of the collective. Aqqiumavvik's *Aajiqatigiingniq* approach embeds in its very existence the means for creating research and wellness programs that are truly responsive to the needs of the community.

**Relationships:** Relations and the strength of bonds within thriving Northern communities foster a sense of accountability, humility, reflection, and love that allow children and others to be honoured. Lived experiences of thriving Northern communities reveal open-mindedness about diversity, what it means to be healthy, and recognition and celebration of diverse ways of living and being (Healey Akearok, 2021).

The Nunavut NEIHR's communities have a holistic worldview wherein human beings hold a connection to the land and animals, which results in interdependence and, in turn, fosters kindness and humility. This further underscores the need (and responsibility) to take care of each other, as well as tolerate and celebrate diversity. Connections to nature and the rhythm of the seasons are a universal construct in Arctic communities. The Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre developed a visual that shows and explains the seasons of the Inuit calendar (Fig. 2).

The centre follows the Inuit Year calendar in the workplace and operations. The Nunavut NEIHR echoes this philosophy and has been working to hold governing committee meetings, and gatherings in alignment with the patterns of the harvesting calendar, to support the best possible relationship building through collective harvesting and sharing practices.

In summary, in the Nunavut NEIHR's communities, relationships between people, family, and the land/environment are at the heart of health and wellbeing and important practices related to food sharing, being observant, and taking action are built on relational spaces (Fig. 3). Kindness, humility, and respect for the world around us drive interactions that further knowledge in Inuit pedagogical practice.

## TEN POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOLARLY AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Creating an Inuit-led centre for advanced learning and scholarship is an immense initiative that has taught us much. This centre can serve as a model for other institutes and universities seeking to promote Indigenous self-determination, cultural preservation, and knowledge advancement. Policy recommendations include the following:

### 1. *Cultivate Indigenous Leadership and Governance*

**Recommendation:** Establish a governance structure that is predominantly led by knowledgeable Indigenous individuals, with a strong emphasis on meaningful community participation rather than political participation. **Rationale:** This ensures that decisions, policies, and practices align with community values, perspectives, and priorities.

### 2. *Embed Inuit Pedagogical Practices*

**Recommendation:** Integrate Inuit ways of learning, teaching, and knowledge transmission into all aspects of curriculum design, delivery, and assessment. **Rationale:** This approach respects and preserves Inuit cultural knowledge and practices while fostering a conducive learning environment.

### 3. *Prioritize Wellbeing and Holistic Development*

**Recommendation:** Develop policies that emphasize the holistic wellbeing of students, staff, and faculty, encompassing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of health. **Rationale:** Promoting wellbeing aligns with Inuit values and fosters a supportive environment for learning and research.

### 4. *Action-Oriented Research and Knowledge Application*

**Recommendation:** Encourage research that not only generates knowledge but also promotes its practical application for the betterment of Inuit communities and beyond. **Rationale:** This approach aligns with the Inuit worldview, which emphasizes the importance of using knowledge for positive action and change.

### 5. *Cultural Safety and Respectful Engagement*

**Recommendation:** Implement policies that ensure cultural safety, respect, and inclusivity for all individuals within the learning environment, especially Inuit students and staff. **Rationale:** This creates a safe and inclusive space where individuals feel valued, respected, and able to fully engage in their learning.

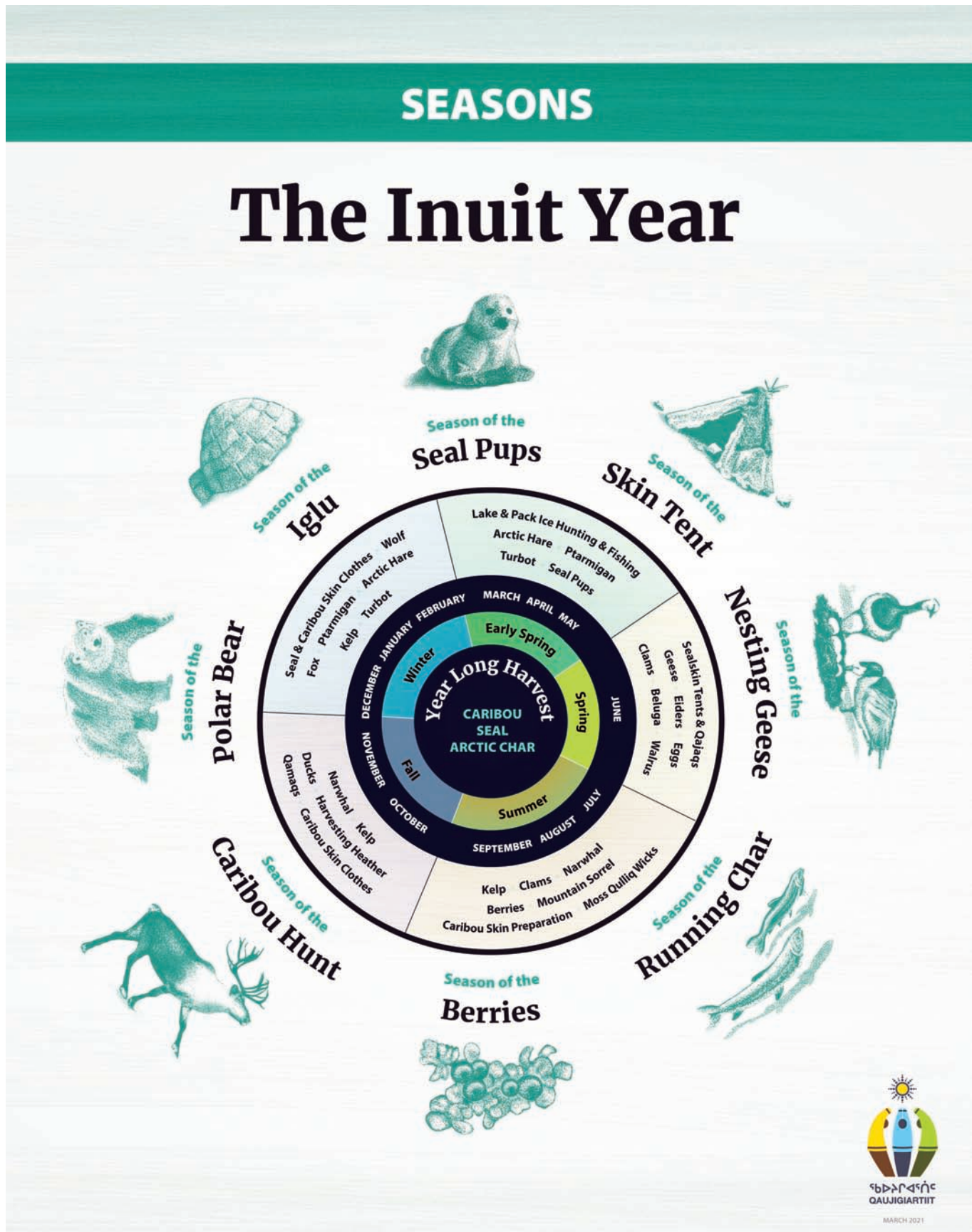


FIG. 2A. Inuit year calendar in English (A) and Inuktitut (B). Reprinted with permission from Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre © 2020.



FIG. 2B. Inuit year calendar in English (A) and Inuktitut (B). Reprinted with permission from Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre © 2020.



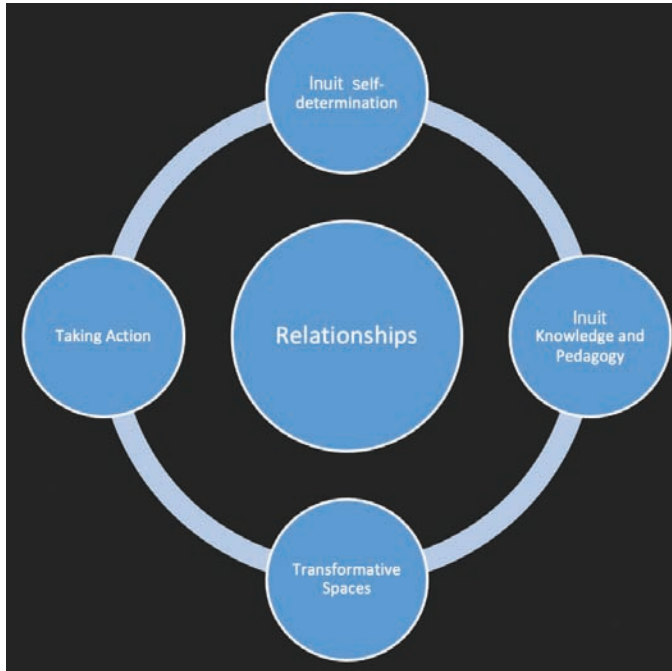


FIG. 3. Relationships are at the heart of the learning environment and the components that are elevated through the Nunavut NEIHR.

### 6. Community-University Partnerships and Relationship Building

**Recommendation:** Foster strong, collaborative relationships with other like-minded Inuit communities and organizations, recognize experts and actively involve them in decision making processes. **Rationale:** This approach acknowledges the importance of community knowledge and perspectives in shaping research and educational initiatives.

### 7. Allocation and Sustainability

**Recommendation:** Allocate sufficient (financial, human, and infrastructure) to support operations and sustainability in the long term. **Rationale:** Adequate are essential for maintaining the quality and effectiveness of programs and initiatives.

### 8. Accountability and Evaluation

**Recommendation:** Implement mechanisms for regular evaluation, feedback, and accountability to ensure that the institute remains aligned with its mission and goals. **Rationale:** Continuous assessment helps identify areas for

improvement and reinforces the institute's commitment to excellence.

### 9. Documentation, Sharing, and Replication

**Recommendation:** Document the institute's practices, successes, and challenges and share this knowledge with other educational institutions seeking to adopt similar models. **Rationale:** This enables the broader academic community to learn from and replicate successful strategies.

### 10. Policy Flexibility and Adaptability

**Recommendation:** Maintain a flexible policy framework that allows for adaptation to changing circumstances, emerging best practices, and evolving community needs. **Rationale:** Flexibility enables the centre to respond effectively to new challenges and opportunities.

By incorporating these recommendations, other universities can learn from and replicate the innovative and Inuit-led model that Qaujigiartiit Health Research Centre has established in Nunavut, ultimately contributing to the broader advancement of Indigenous education and scholarship.

## CONCLUSION

The Nunavut NEIHR is a transformative health research environment that is bringing Inuit knowledge, approaches, and worldviews into the mainstream academic environment.

The Nunavut NEIHR's approach is that research should be used as a tool for action in the Nunavut NEIHR's communities. Research for the sake of curiosity is not supported by the Nunavut NEIHR's communities. Without action, there is no research. Nunavummiut work together across the Nunavut territory and with other communities in Inuit Nunangat to achieve what we know in our hearts to be possible. This is how research is organized from the Inuit worldview. This heart-centred approach is the guiding framework for Inuit methodological and pedagogical practice (Beveridge, 2012; Rodon et al., 2015; Morrison, 2016) in this study.

The Nunavut NEIHR is and will continue to be an environment where students and trainees are supported and encouraged to work in service to Nunavut communities to provide evidence and information that can be used to effect change for the betterment of wellbeing among the Nunavut NEIHR's people.

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