

The University of the Highlands and Islands project: a model for networked learning?

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Introduction

The Highlands and Islands of Scotland are a remote and rugged expanse of land on the periphery of Britain and Europe. The region has long struggled against the adversity of isolation – geographic, economic and social – and has endured significant economic decline and depopulation. The area, from Shetland to the Mull of Kintyre, from the Western Isles to the foothills of the Cairngorms, comprises nearly twenty per cent of the land mass of Britain. It has less than one per cent of the UK population (fewer than half a million inhabitants) and as such is one of the least densely populated areas of Europe. With the exception of the conurbation of Inverness, which is one of Europe's fastest-growing towns and currently bidding for city status, most of the inhabitants live in small and widely dispersed towns, villages and crofting communities. At the 1991 census there were ninety-three inhabited islands in archipelagos of Shetland and Orkney, and the Inner and Outer Hebrides.

The region has long suffered from a lack of critical mass to support services and facilities, inexorably exacerbated by concomitant emigration and population decline. In the nineteenth century, people and communities were forcibly cleared to be replaced with sheep. In the twentieth century, the traditional micro-industries of fishing and farming have been eroded in the face of strong national and international competition. Many of the region's young people have sought education and careers outside the region, particularly true of those seeking higher education opportunities. Indeed, historically, a significantly high proportion of the region's youth have entered higher education. During the early 1980s, when fourteen per cent of school-leavers in England were entering higher education, and the figure for Scotland as a whole was twenty-one per cent, the percentage figure for the Highlands and Islands was a staggering thirty-two per cent¹.

However, all of the twenty-two current universities and institutions of higher education in Scotland lie in, or close to, the more densely populated triangle formed by the cities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Young people in search of an education had to leave, and once departed, they seldom returned.

The idea that the Highlands and Islands of Scotland deserve a university of their own is not a new one. Sir Thomas Urquhart published his plans for higher education of the young men of Cromarty² as early as 1653. In a paper headed 'On Education' and probably dated around 1706, Sir George Mackenzie, First Earl of Cromartie, put forward his own proposals a proto-university based in Inverness. The curriculum was to include instruction for women in morality, and weekly 'public lessons', perhaps an early example of adult continuing education³. More recently, another bid for Inverness under the 1964 Robbins expansion failed in the face of competition from Stirling, and to the dismay of many outside the central belt, Scotland's newest university of the time was established close to all the others.

In 1992, the year when the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act brought the total of Scotland's Higher Education Institutions to the present twenty-two, Sir Graham Hills, former Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, proposed to the then Highland Regional Council a model university based on a multi-campus partnership of local institutions. The blueprint was for a university that would be regional in terms of being both *in* its region and *of* its region⁴.

One of the most significant and far-reaching aspects of the Hills vision was the new learning paradigm it proposed for higher education in the Highlands and Islands. Drawing on Gibbons' et al *The New Production of Knowledge*⁵, Hills advocates the alternative 'mode 2' basis for undergraduate education. 'Mode 2' as a learning mode as opposed to 'mode 1' as a teaching mode should be the defining pedagogical impetus behind the new university in the move towards a 'learning society'⁶.

Evolution of the Project

In 1993, Highlands and Islands Enterprise established the University of the Highlands and Islands project (UHI), charged with the task of establishing a university in and for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. It was indeed to be a new university for the twenty-first century, a collegiate federation linked by a powerful information and communications highway. Its pedagogical approach was not to be based on traditional distance learning modes and models. The fundamental concept of UHI was that individuals should be able to engage locally in learning despite their distant location; that people and places should be linked in community learning networks, operating collectively as a single university entity.

At the time of writing, UHI is a federation of thirteen institutions of further and higher education, being local authority operated (such as Orkney and Shetland Colleges), larger, incorporated further education colleges such as Inverness, Perth and Moray Colleges, industry-funded institutions like the North Atlantic Fisheries College, privately-funded colleges such as the Sabhal Mòr Ostaig Gaelic College on Skye and the Highland Theological College, and two research institutions, being the Scottish Association for Marine Science near Oban and Seafish Aquaculture on Ardnamurchan.

Provision exists, and negotiations are underway, for the addition of new partners: Lochaber College based at Fort William currently holds UHI Associate Institution status. Many of these academic partners in UHI also operate micro-networks of learning centres making provision available to small and geographically dispersed communities. The recent securing of significant European funding will facilitate a strategic and consolidated approach to community learning networks across the area.

UHI's development trajectory has been steep and swift. In 1996, the Millennium Commission awarded £33.35 million to enhance the physical estate and infrastructure of the UHI project. In 1998 UHI achieved the significant step of accreditation by the Open University Validation Services (OUVS) for the validation of its provision. At the end of that year a formal request was submitted to the Secretary of State for Scotland to be designated an institution of higher education.

It is worth pausing here to note the comparative speed of these developments. From the time of the initial conception of a university for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to the establishment of the UHI Project Office, almost four hundred years have elapsed. The Project is charged with establishing the said university within four years, a tall order by anyone's standards. Clearly, achieving the vision of a regional university both in and of its geographical area requires careful planning in terms of its curriculum content, the methods by which that content will be delivered, and the assurance of quality of the learning experience across the entire spectrum of provision. Not least the issues of sustainability and long-term funding require consideration and planning.

Curriculum

The UHI curriculum has been developed through consultation of subject experts in the academic partners with appropriate community, business and industry interest groups. A number of Curriculum Development Working Groups were established in 1997 with a tripartite remit. Their first task was to consider existing staff expertise, resource availability and curriculum provision throughout the network of academic partners. Their next task was to identify gaps in this provision and areas for the further development of a higher education curriculum, with due cognisance of student and employer needs, staff expertise and learner support requirements. On the basis of these two activities, their third and final task was the recommendation of the development of provision to fulfil these identified curricular needs, along with identifying the human and material resources required for this. Recent academic restructuring has subsumed these working groups into five new UHI Faculties, charged with the task, among others, of continuing and refining curriculum developments.

In addition to the five Faculties, four research schools have been established, and a number of PhD studentships sponsored. This is an ambitious project designed to cultivate and enhance indigenous research and development for the Highlands and Islands. UHI academic staff too are encouraged to engage in programmes of higher study and continuous professional development. The paradigm shift required by staff experienced in the design and delivery of programmes of further education to the more learner-centred, independent approaches demanded by a higher education curriculum and methodology is recognised, and significant support accorded to the achievement of this shift.

In accordance with the principles recommended by the Garrick report for Scotland to the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education⁷, UHI has developed a range of broad-based three-year bachelors degrees (Scottish ordinary degrees) with a vocational emphasis. While Academic Council, UHI's senior academic body, has recently agreed the development in principle of selected honours provision across a range of curriculum areas, honours delivery is on hold pending an established quality track record of quality delivery. An important element in UHI's curriculum developments at present is the integration of existing Higher National Certificate and Diploma awards into a unifying modular structure and quality assurance procedures.

The degree awards developed by UHI reflect the intention to establish high-quality higher education provision for the region, and to tailor this provision specifically to the region's needs. Developments in business administration, for example, place significant emphasis on the small and medium-sized enterprises that constitute the vast majority of active businesses in the area. Information and communications technology is an important and integrated curriculum focus, as well as a means of facilitating its delivery. The acquisition of transferable skills is recognised as vitally important for businesses that rely on all-rounders rather than specialists.

Applied science developments in fisheries, land management, forestry and marine ecology are all designed to meet specific industry-oriented economic needs. Sustainable development, rurality and environmental management are recurrent themes in the UHI curriculum. Provision in tourism, leisure and hospitality management addresses issues particular to the Highlands and Islands in the context of generic industry and commercial needs, concerns and policies.

There are substantial collaborative curriculum ventures with Scandinavia, the Arctic and the North Atlantic Rim, where common issues of isolation, rurality and sustainability are paramount. The importance of the transferable skills required by the lifelong learner in the economic marketplace of the twenty-first century is reflected in the formal integration of

personal and professional capabilities into all modules and programmes of the UHI undergraduate curriculum.

Delivery

Much deliberation and analysis has taken place with regard to the delivery of the UHI curriculum. The need to deliver courses of learning to a variety of learners in a range of settings is fundamental. There is a plethora of learning centres across the area, ranging from state-of-the-art college-based learning resource centres to community-based multi-purpose meeting-places. These learning centres have different names, different types of owner, ranges of uses and funding mechanisms. Currently there are approximately fifty learning centres, offering a range of provision in a variety of ways. One of the current developmental imperatives for UHI is the mapping of these centres and the activities which take place and may take place there, and the establishment of a baseline quality threshold for learners across the region.

Embedded in the basic definition of a learning centre as a place where individuals can go to engage in learning are certain assumptions that may be expressed as learner entitlements, being: access to a computer with a connection to the UHI wide area network; access to a tutor and a student adviser; access to materials; access to a learning space. Whatever the mode of delivery, the learning experience depends on resources. A common definition of a learning resource would generally refer to the way in which the content is packaged, such as in print, CD-ROM or audio-visual format. However, in the context of UHI and networked learning, a wider categorisation of a learning resource is proposed, one that takes into consideration the mutual interdependence of the human, material and environmental resources required for meaningful community learning. In 1999, the UHI Learning Environment and Technologies group published its report 'Towards a Learning Strategy for the University of the Highlands and Islands'⁸, referred to internally as the LET Report. This has been an important document for staff across the network engaged in developing a higher education curriculum for networked delivery, and allows an insight into the kind of learning strategies and methodologies that are envisaged for the emerging university.

Discussion

There is, then, considerable evidence not only of the need for a university in and for the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, but also of the successes to date of the UHI project and the federal academic partners in working towards this goal. There is also a long way to go in a number of key areas.

Already there is evidence of UHI's success in addressing the needs of the lifelong learner in the Highlands and Islands. According to 1997 statistics, UHI Academic Partners were already providing a locally developed community curriculum to a student population of almost six thousand students, of whom around half are part-time learners. In terms of equality of educational opportunity, there is a near equity in male/female balance, more than fifty per cent of learners are over twenty-five, and over eighty per cent are local to their academic partner institution. These are early, positive indicators that UHI is addressing the issues of social exclusion and geographical isolation in a context of lifelong learning. However, little evidence is available to date of the extent to which UHI is meeting the higher educational needs of all its constituents from all sectors of the community, particularly ethnic minority groupings. A highly sophisticated Equal Opportunities Policy has been developed. If successfully implemented, this detailed policy, compiled through consultation with recognised experts from a wide spectrum of interest groups, should lay a foundation for equality of representation for all social and ethnic groupings in the higher education community of the Highlands and Islands.

In February 1999, UHI launched its unique 'Linguistic and Cultural Identity Policy' which pledged to give equal weight and import to five indigenous 'languages' of the Highlands and

Islands, and the different cultural groupings they represent. UHI recognises English and Gaelic as formal languages for curriculum delivery and assessment. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig College on Skye conducts all its business through the medium of Gaelic, and significant proportions of the curriculum at other academic partners are delivered and assessed in Gaelic. The recently implemented UHI Library Management System, a uniquely distributed system which has unionised the disparate library catalogues of all academic partners in the federation, has a bilingual English/Gaelic interface. The other 'languages' identified in the UHI Linguistic and Cultural Identity Policy – Scots, Orcadian and Shetlandic – are not recognised in the library management system, nor in quality assurance and academic management procedures.

The issue of long-term recurrent funding and the sustainability of curriculum developments and delivery modes and methods is plainly crucial for the future of the project. Student uptake of the higher education curriculum is mainly at levels 1 and 2 (HNC and HND) with few students currently engaged on degree-level programmes. Significant sums of money have been invested in the development for delivery of relevant and accessible programmes of study, in terms of the development of curriculum content, quality assurance systems and structures, staff development and learning resource provision. A return on this investment in terms of student recruitment, enhanced employment opportunities and economic improvement is plainly required. There is a clear need for enhanced local, national and international recruitment and awareness-raising strategies.

A further challenge for the near future is the achievement of the aims set and the methodologies proposed in the 1999 LET Report. Much work still remains to be done in the establishment and monitoring of community learning networks, the development and implementation of the resources and environments they require, the learning activities that will take place, and the impact of the centres and the learning on the communities of learners and the learners themselves. It is to be hoped that the interests of the students and communities of the region will prevail in meaningful research and development of strategies and methodologies for the most effective matching of individual learners with content, mode and learning media.

Student feedback from the 1998/99 academic session indicates that while ICT is recognised as an important and integral part of the UHI curriculum and its delivery, some assumptions have been made about the propensity of all students, particularly mature learners, to develop and exercise the necessary ICT skills with sufficient speed and alacrity. There are warning bells to be heeded here for those responsible for managing the UHI learning experience. It is an established tenet of educational hermeneutics that the human mind thinks with ideas, not with information^{9 10}. There are dangers inherent in basing the use of computers in education on the outmoded view of human beings as information processors. For meaningful learning, experience and ideas must be privileged over technologised knowledge, and UHI must remain true to its principle that the communities drive the curriculum which drives the technology.

There is some potential tension between two current drives within UHI: the drive to take the curriculum to the communities, and the drive for degree awarding powers and university status. The former must not jeopardise the latter; the latter should not stifle the former. In the context of her analysis of post-Dearing academic management structures, Susan Weil offers the following telling comment on the pitfalls of complex committee structures that UHI would do well to avoid: 'Within the formal system of universities, committees lumber on, often upholding rigidities and unspoken assumptions, and seldom functioning as sites for a critical scrutiny of the limitations of existing epistemologies of practice.'¹¹ UHI is perhaps uniquely positioned in the context of British higher education to implement the kind of organisational structures that will promote stability in diversity, and the ability to respond swiftly and meaningfully to changing social and economic conditions. Public and sectoral scrutiny is intense; the courage of conviction is required.

The people of the Highlands and Islands have waited a long time for 'their university' and they want it 'now'. There is a clear need to turn the rhetoric of community learning networks into real places where meaningful and relevant learning can be engaged in by the people who want it. For the moment, considerable efforts are being exerted in the realisation for this new millennium of a seventeenth-century vision.

References

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