MOOR OR LESS? WHAT CAN THE SCOTTISH UNIVERSITY OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS MEAN FOR AN INTEGRATED, LOCALLY-DELIVERED MODE OF COMMUNITY AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN GIPPSLAND?

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ABSTRACT

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) Millennium Institute in Scotland is an impressive example of providing greater and more flexible post-compulsory education opportunities for a diverse and isolated population. This paper explores what Gippsland may learn from this example by drawing in literature on lifelong learning, learning regions, competition, and collaboration.

INTRODUCTION

This paper does not advocate replicating the UHI concept in the Gippsland area of south-eastern Victoria, Australia. Instead, I offer it as a model, a “serving suggestion” for post-compulsory education provision in this region. I had some rather vaguely defined dissatisfaction with post-compulsory education provision in Gippsland, especially with regard to students leaving home to study, not only for the city but even for courses within the region that could be offered at locations that were five or six hours drive away. When I knew I was visiting Scotland for the Making Knowledge Work conference in October 2005, I recommenced an earlier discussion with a former lecturer, Jeff Malley, on parallels he had drawn between Gippsland’s situation and the goals of the UHI Millennium Institute. I recall that I was expecting some impressive use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT); but seeing the UHI Millennium Institute first-hand made an impact on me. The choice of the UHI Millennium Institute as an example is based on apparent similarities between the two regions such as rurality and isolation in some communities, population loss, and comparatively low participation in higher education. The aim is to stimulate discussion and assessment on why we have what we have, and what we might like to change about it.

WHAT IS THE UHI MILLENNIUM INSTITUTE?

The concept of a distributed university in the Scottish highlands and islands was proposed in 1975 to the Highlands and Islands Development Board by Farquhar Macintosh (rector of the Royal High School, Edinburgh). The University of the Highlands and Islands Advisory Group was formed in 1991 and UHI Limited was established in 1994. In 2001, after a decade of campaigning for a regional university, the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute was designated as a higher education institution by one of the first acts of the new Scottish parliament. This extraordinary entity now provides access to higher education via a network of fourteen academic partners with seventy-five locations across the Scottish Highlands and Islands. (UHI Millennium Institute, 2004a) These learning centres vary greatly in their size and nature, ranging from regional colleges to learning centres in small towns and villages. Some are owned and run by local councils but are still part of the UHI network. From one’s local learning centre, it is possible to access a higher education course offered at a college hundreds of kilometres away, without leaving one’s community. “One subject can unite several hundred students based in Perth, Fort William, Elgin, Inverness, Stornoway, Kirkwall and Lerwick, for example.” (Highland News Group, 2005, p. 34)

This is achieved through networked ICT such as video-conferencing and electronic mail, alongside local support services. On the day I visited Kinlochleven Learning Centre (Lochaber College), a Tourism student was sitting an examination from Perth College, nearly three-hours’ drive away. UHI degrees are currently accredited by the Open University. However, it is anticipated that the UHI Millennium Institute will have full university status by 2007. It will
then be known as the University of the Highlands and Islands.

Major sources of funding for the UHI Millennium Institute are the European Social Fund and £36 million from the National Lottery’s Millennium Commission (UHI Millennium Institute, 2005c). Governance and management of the UHI Millennium Institute is through the UHI Foundation, the Board of Governors, the Academic Council, and an Executive Board. A new constitution in 2003 increased the number of local community and business representatives on the UHI Foundation (UHI Millennium Institute 2004b). Academic partners and learning centres in the UHI network can be found at http://www.uhi.ac.uk/marketingandcomms/UHI_map_2005.jpg. Some academic partners have long standing as research institutes, frequently focusing on specific geographic and social situations of each region. One example is the Centre for Mountain Studies at Perth College, UHI; and another is the Decommissioning and Environmental Remediation Centre near Thurso which tackles the unique issues associated with the remediation of decommissioned nuclear industrial sites (UHI Millennium Institute, 2004b).

Learning centres in the UHI network have their own range of certificate and non-certificate courses, similar to the range of adult literacy and numeracy, lifestyle, and vocational courses offered in neighbourhood houses and community adult-learning centres in Victoria. The UHI courses are offered in addition to these and are grouped under four faculties: Faculty of Science and Technology, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Faculty of Health, and Faculty of Business and Leisure (UHI Millennium Institute, 2004a). The student profile reveals a high proportion of part-time students (52%) and students over 25 years of age (58%). Ninety percent of students come from within the UHI operating area and many are first-generation, higher education participants. While it is anticipated that the number of school leavers studying at UHI will increase when university status is achieved, progress in including youth is impressive. “Funding council data (published December 2003) showed that UHI had the highest proportion in the UK of young undergraduate students from traditionally excluded social groups” (UHI Millennium Institute 2004a).

The underpinning philosophy of UHI is to strengthen and sustain communities. According to the UHI’s Widening Participation Manager, Iain Morrison:

> The network of learning centres provides a physical presence at the heart of many local and rural communities and accessible and supportive access points into learning. UHI continues to use learning centres as a way to encourage the retention of people in their local areas and, through the development of social capital, UHI aims to make these communities more sustainable. (UHI Millennium Institute 2005a, p. 3)

At the time of my visit, I found the most impressive element of the UHI arrangement was not the technology but the relationships and strong community identities (which may be understood as social capital) that enable such a diverse network of academic partners (geographically, sectorally, and specialization) to hold a united vision and to cooperate to such an extent over a sustained period of time. The relationships and vision that seem to be held so strongly are powerfully conveyed to the community and potential students through case studies presented in the prospectus and other documents and in the local media. It was explained to me that the people of the Highlands and Islands have, for many years, strongly desired and actively campaigned for their own university, and it is this unifying goal that continues to sustain the partnerships. My limited knowledge of Scottish history suggests that unification and agreement has not been a common feature in the Scottish highlands and islands, and I saw parallels with my own region’s factions and historical tensions.

**SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE REGIONS**

In 1990, the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy commissioned the Rural Development Centre of the University of New England in New South Wales to investigate the transferability of the European concept of the “telecottage” or “community teleservice centre” that uses modern information technology or “telematic” solutions, to provide government services, education, and training in remote and rural locations. The emerging UHI Millennium
Institute was profiled in this study which found that, as the ICT issues were resolved, a version of telecottages for Australian conditions could emerge.

It appears that the telecottages concept has a great deal to commend it as a means of addressing a number of areas of disadvantage suffered by those living in both the remote parts of Australia and the more closely settled rural regions. In remote regions, particularly those with a narrow economic base, telecottages have considerable potential as access points to wider educational opportunities and to information resources, including information about government services. (Horner and Reeve, 1991, p. 111)

So what does the region of Gippsland in Australia have in common with the Scottish Highlands and Islands? Physically, there is coast, high ground, and remoteness. The target area for the UHI Millennium Institute is 38,678 square kilometres (Horner and Reeve, 1991, p. 34). Although the region constitutes 20% of the land mass of the United Kingdom, it has only 1% of the UK population, thinly distributed in small towns and villages, including those on 93 inhabited islands. “The region has, for centuries, struggled against the vagaries of its isolation – geographic, economic, and social – and paid a high price in terms of economic decline and depopulation.” (Duffield and Hills, 1998, p. 2). By comparison, Gippsland, at 41,434 square kilometres, is over half the size of Scotland itself, but comparable to the UHI catchment area. Dr Bob Birrell (2001, pp. 28-29) of the Centre for Population Studies comments on the exodus from Gippsland over the past two decades, a net loss of nearly 9,000 people from the region with an alarming proportion in the 15-24 age group – higher than anywhere else in rural and regional Victoria.

The analysis suggests that some of the youngest and better qualified residents are leaving Gippsland. The tough times experienced by those who have stayed behind implies that current residents are likely to show up as disadvantaged, at least relative to their metropolitan counterparts (Birrell, 2001, p. 31).

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF POST-COMPULSORY EDUCATION IN GIPPSLAND

UHI partner institutions, there are a number of instances in Gippsland’s universities and institutes of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) of research and teaching very closely aligned to local strengths, specialties, and industries. By no means an exhaustive list, the following are illustrative examples of such activity.

- Research and Education Centre on Bullock Island established in 2004 by the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University, East Gippsland Institute of TAFE (EGIT), and other government and non-government partners as part of RMIT University’s Community and Regional Partnerships (East Gippsland). http://www.rmit.edu.au/browse/About%20RMIT/RMIT%20Campuses%20and%20Sites/RMIT%20University%20and%20East%20Gippsland/
- EGIT and TAFE - Forestech - “Highly specialised (and experiential) education for students intending to build careers based on living resources such as forestry, fishing, and any form of ecotourism.” http://www.egtafe.vic.edu.au/docs/forestec.html
- Gippsland Education Precinct (GEP) established 2005. A cross-sectoral partnership located at Monash University Gippsland Campus although it is its own legal entity. “The aim of this partnership is to improve educational opportunities for learners in the Latrobe Valley, Gippsland and beyond, through integrated learning pathways, a focus on the needs of individual learners and through ICT.” http://www.gippstafe.vic.edu.au/gep/gep.html
- GRACE (Gippsland Regional Automation Centre) established July 2005. Located in the School of Applied Sciences and Engineering at Monash University Gippsland Campus. Funded by the Victorian Government’s Science and Technology Initiative and a local consortium of industries and Monash University. The initiative involves innovative industrial
automation solutions developed with local businesses. GRACe’s initial project is *Intelligent Fish Sorting* with the Lakes Entrance Fisherman’s Co-operative. http://www.gippsland.monash.edu.au/science/research/areas/

**Sectoral tyranny**

However, despite some impressive efforts and promising cross-sectoral partnership and articulation, Gippsland (and probably Victoria’s) education system remains essentially sectoral. The resulting impediments in opportunity and strategy of this limited vision and action are shared by students, staff, the universities themselves and, ultimately, the region. It may be too early to determine the success of the most recent and promising of these initiatives. However, I think that incremental progress towards reducing the impediments of sectoral boundaries is certainly being made.

**THE ISOLATION OF ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION (ACE)**

The transformative power of our neighbourhood houses and community learning centres is immense and incalculable. Their welcoming environment means that people marginalised from formal education find growing confidence and connection in these meeting and learning places and may take on further courses – but they may have to leave the learning centre to do so. With the UHI model, students can continue to learn locally if they choose. But in Victoria and Gippsland, adult education providers, large or small, are in no way players in what universities do. If TAFE has been viewed in peripheral vision by universities, adult education (ironically, since adults are educated at universities) occupies a confining sectoral blind spot. But with the UHI Millennium Institute, Adult and Community Education (ACE) and ACE centres appear not only to be recognised, but also celebrated and harnessed for their local proximity, infrastructure, local knowledge, and student-centred focus.

**LIFELONG LEARNING AND DE-SECTORING**

The concept of lifelong learning has come to include both formal and non-formal learning, in recognition that human beings continue to learn from birth to death, and do so in everyday life both inside and outside formal educational institutions. Faris (2005) suggests that lifelong learning “provides an integrated, comprehensive, learning-based community response to the silos of government departments and the narrow disciplinary approaches of many academics” (p. 17). So, lifelong learning (for an individual) does not simply mean that a person can find a place to study at whatever age they are. Neither is lifelong learning for a region simply the sum total of institutions under the categories of primary, secondary, and tertiary that are able to cater to its population of potential lifelong learners. Lifelong learning, as a collective regional responsibility, requires cross-sectoral strategic planning and partnered action. But are the necessary relationships in place and of sufficient strength? Action may not easily follow intent. Where to plan and act jointly will need to address (hugely) different forms of governance, funding formulae, and degrees of autonomy. I suggest that there is a role for universities in nurturing lifelong learning in their regions, but not necessarily a primary leadership role that risks a falling back into historical patterns of ownership and dominance. Who then would lead such an endeavour? The Scottish Executive led the UHI initiative, which suggests a lead role for the Victorian Government if a new cross-sectoral model is desired in Gippsland.

**LEARNING REGIONS**

Faris (2005) explains that, more recently, the concept of lifelong learning has been advanced by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as “a compass in the uncharted territory of the knowledge-based economy and society” (p. 16), and that this has led to a great interest by governments in learning communities and regions and, from the mid 1990s, the establishment of a number of learning communities, cities, and towns in the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (p. 30).

**REGIONAL RELEVANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY**

An important component of the philosophical motivation of Sharpman and Harman’s (1997) *Australia’s Future Universities*, is that much
discussion on change in higher education is either institutionally or even individually focused (Sharpman and Harman, 1997, p. 15). My paper aims to focus primarily on Gippsland; not the specific, post-compulsory education providers currently operating in the region. Communities need to benefit from having a university in their midst, and not just as an employer and consumer or for those geographically close to the physical institution. Relevant research and programs are obvious requisites, but beneath and upholding these must be a fundamentally close community connection and genuine communication. The UHI model places the needs of its regions as its principal consideration, and this central goal appears not to be side-stepped or “hijacked” by existing providers. Its example calls for a collective structure involving Monash University’s Gippsland Campus, but not designed around it.

COMPETITION OR COLLABORATION IN A REGIONAL HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETPLACE?

The noble goals of learning regions and collaboration appear to be markedly at odds with a prevailing climate of competition in higher education. Simon Marginson has profiled the climate of competition introduced by the Commonwealth Government’s higher education reforms of 1987-1989 (Marginson, 2000). But now it is not only higher education institutions competing with one another or even the disturbing turf wars observable between campuses of the same university over “my course” and “my catchment”. The peril of preserving an ivory (or sandstone) tower is even more acute now that degree-awarding powers have been given to some institutes of TAFE. In addition, the absence of Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) fees, a vocational focus, and recognised industry relevance, these colleges are increasingly viable competitors to universities in what has become a higher education marketplace. Universities, especially the vulnerable, should be taking note and taking action. A negative stance would be to defend the bastions from challenge, while a more positive and prudent response would be to learn from their example. Some evidence of rising to this challenge may be seen in an increase in work practice schemes and vocationally-targeted programs. I argue for collaboration rather than competition, not the least because universities, by themselves, may not be the strongest in progressing new forms of learning.

BUILDING(S) ON RELATIONSHIPS

Gippsland is a large region and the need to relocate to take up a higher education place, even at the Gippsland Campus of Monash University in Churchill, appears to be an accepted reality. I am also aware of students travelling great distances to study individual units offered at other Monash campuses, and even chasing their preferred course as it relocates to another campus, for reasons unfathomable to them. However, the strongest and most vital distinction of the UHI Millennium Institute is only partly that there is no need to relocate in order to study one’s chosen course of study. After all, Gippsland residents do have access to a range of distance and Open University options. UHI Millennium Institute is distinctive in that it is not a virtual setting – it is bricks and mortar, but locally situated and linked to a common purpose and identity through valued and nurtured relationships. It is not merely distributed learning, but a university in communities. The collegiality of going to a campus, and all the benefits and belonging that this brings, appears to be retained. But it is somewhat easier to imagine cross-sectoral relationships away from the physical tangibility of bricks and mortar, especially sandstone. The image of edifices can be limiting when trying to imagine links between sandstone cloisters and a neighbourhood house operating from a former Scout hall. Of course, infrastructure and facilities are vital, and they support the accessible educational programs made possible by the relationships. “But UHI is keen to stress it is not a virtual institution and UHI Week proves just that – giving the public a chance to meet the real people and visit the facilities which will be part of the future University of the Highlands” (Highland News Group, 2005, p. 34).

The concept of the academic partners in the UHI network effectively conveys not only the wide and diverse coverage of the UHI Millennium

1 This is not solely a Gippsland-to-metropolitan campus phenomenon, metropolitan students may also “chase” units offered only at Gippsland and inaccessible via distance education.
Institute but also that each institution appears to retain its own identity. As an illustrative aid and prompt for discussion, I have presented, in Figure 1, the existing post-compulsory providers (and some larger ACE centres) in Gippsland as they might look as part of an imagined Gippsland Regional University along a similar framework to the UHI Millennium Institute.

![Figure 1. The academic partners of an imagined Gippsland Regional University.](image)

Underlying map copyright (n.d.) Tourism Victoria. Adapted with permission.

David R. Charles of the University of Newcastle in the United Kingdom suggests that the increasing engagement of universities with their local communities is part of the role of the university in adapting to changing societal expectations. He stresses the importance of the concept of “place” in martalling cooperation, and cautions that such engagement takes a variety of forms, some of which may be less formalised and therefore less visible (Charles, 2005, pp. 143-145). “Community” itself is a problematic notion with a university “…embedded in many different types of ‘community’: some local, some global, some overlapping and interacting, some barely recognising each other” (Charles, 2005, p. 148).

CONCLUSION

Charles’s discussion on the multiplicity, fluidity, and invisibility of university communities seems to resonate with what can be seen with Gippsland. As a very large and diverse region, it is very difficult to throw a lasso over what are effectively several regions or at least sub-regions and call it “The Gippsland Region”. The spread of post-compulsory education provision represented in Figure 1 reflects the diverse needs and specialties of Gippsland. Much of the landscape of Figure 1 is already in place in the form of existing structures, minus the (apparent) strategic partnerships and linking mechanisms across sectoral silos, and of course the systemic inclusion of ACE. Gippsland may be somewhat closer to the UHI Millennium Institute style of provision than I initially suspected. Preparation of this paper and the representation of Figure 1 has been a thought-provoking exercise, and I anticipate the response of my colleagues.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to the people of the UHI Millennium Institute, specifically Margaret Cameron, (Learning Centres Development Coordinator), Iain Morrison (Widening Participation Manager), Jenny Tizard (Academic Registrar), and the coordinators and members of the learning centres of Lochaber College, Mallaig Community Centre, and Kinlochleven Learning Centre. I thank the ACFE Policy and Planning Committee for supporting the leg of my trip to the Scottish Highlands, and for their encouragement. I acknowledge my friend and colleague Jeff Malley who drew the UHI-Gippsland relevance to my attention. Thanks also to Larissa Morey for designing Figure 1.

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