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Jennings, Andrew; Caimbeul, Iain; Carden, Siún

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The Social and Cultural Capital of Island Communities: Exploring Mechanisms to Inform the UHI Islands 2020 Strategy – A Preliminary Investigation

Prologue

From the perspective of Island Studies this research into the impact of the UHI Island 2020 Strategy is timely and highly relevant. This discipline is based on the understanding that islands have particular needs, political, social, economic, linguistic and cultural, which if not met have a direct impact on the demographic viability of their communities. These needs are not always met or even addressed by their respective national or mainland institutions. The UHI Island 2020 strategy is an important step by the UHI to ensure it is not one of the latter and to articulate how the university must be a positive force within the islands, engaging with local communities to create the opportunities that will support existing island populations.

The UHI has been forward thinking in developing a specific strategy for the island component of the research, learning and knowledge exchange activities of the institution. There is an understanding within the university that it is a university of the islands as well as the highlands. Of course, there have been academic centres and colleges based in the islands that have been undertaking excellent work in the island communities since before the creation of the university. However, this strategy marks a new ambition by the institution to focus attention on the islands to increase its engagement and impact.

This research involved an online survey which was completed by key stakeholders to ascertain their opinions and awareness of the UHI Islands Strategy 2020. In addition, there were focus groups representing the academic disciplines taking part in the research, which provided a 'richer picture' of the direct relevance of the strategy to each of the academic disciplines. In addition, a series of case-studies, effectively discipline reviews, employing a 'scoping exercise' format, highlighted key issues and priorities for the UHI within each of the participating research disciplines and explored potential mismatches between the reality of the strategy and local aspirations. The disciplines which undertook case-studies / reviews were the creative industries, community / socio-economic studies, Gaelic language studies, northern / nordic studies and archaeology / heritage. It was not possible to organise a case-study / review for education. However, the current wider review of education being undertaken by the university should also have an island's dimension.

The main conclusions of the stakeholder survey were that there was broad support for the general thrust of the strategy, but it was felt that there were gaps and issues that still needed to be addressed, in relation to purpose, implementation, and impact. In particular, there needs to be greater clarity on the purpose of engagement with UHI research, and stronger linkages between the UHI and island communities. The recommendations focussed on deepening engagement with the stakeholders to ensure that the strategy really reflected their strategic themes and priorities. Clearly there is more development and engagement work to be done, to ensure that the strategy aligns with island needs, at least as identified by the stakeholders.

The case-study / review conclusions provided discipline-centred information. For example, in the northern / Nordic studies case-study 7 participants, representing the 3 island council areas, saw the value and relevance of the strategy. They were enthused to take part in the discussion about the importance of Nordic culture to the islands. The discussion focussed on the desire of the participants to work with the UHI, and for the university to be a facilitator for cross-island collaboration, in the education, culture, heritage and business sectors, potentially working more with schools, to show young people the opportunities in their communities and to ensure that local heritage is transferred to new generations.

An important recommendation was for this discipline to hold regular cross-island meetings to ensure effective communication with heritage organisations to ensure the free flow of information. Effective communication, or lack thereof, also featured in the creative industries case-study / review. Participants, 8 in number, wanted more and better communication with the UHI for opportunities to emerge and hopefully be brought to fruition. As with the Nordic / northern studies case-study, participants wanted meetings where relevant shared interests could be discussed (and for UHI staff to respond to their emails). The archaeology / heritage case-study / review secured 28 participants. It provides a very clear case for the value of archaeology to the islands and some specific, pointed comments about the strategy. There was agreement that focus on the islands and raising the profile of the island colleges was a good thing. However, some participants stated that the strategy was not ambitious enough and that it failed to capture the full range of opportunities. It was also suggested that the document itself could be clearer, particularly for a non-academic audience, including sections like 'ways we can work with you'. It was also stated that if the island strategy is to be a truly useful document there needs to be an associated development or action plan.

More generally in the case-study / reviews it was apparent that not everyone was aware of the strategy beforehand. Clearly it is difficult to assess how the community regard the strategy when they are unaware of it! However, given that the strategy only dates to 2020 there has not been much time for it to become embedded in the community consciousness, and given the challenges of COVID, it's not surprising that awareness was limited. Perhaps, the most important role of the case-studies has been that the discipline areas have been able to disseminate information about the strategy widely throughout the islands, engaging with their constituencies. The positive way the community has engaged in discussion indicates that islanders welcome it and there is an enthusiasm to engage further. It is up to UHI to make sure that this engagement takes place. Attention needs to be paid to the recommendations from each case-study, so that they can be taken forward. As it says in the Gaelic case-study, 'The UHI Islands Strategy needs to be 'made real' for communities and engagement with the resources of the university need to be strengthened with communication linkages to communities made more effective in terms of knowledge exchange processes and subsequent actions.'

To reiterate, one of the main take-aways from the survey and the case-studies is that even if the UHI Island 2020 Strategy itself might not be well-known, once they are made aware of its existence islanders welcome it. However, despite some lack of knowledge of the strategy, islanders are aware of the research and learning centres within UHI undertaking important research at an international level in the islands. They would like more engagement with these centres, as seen by their participation in the research. Together we can maximise the benefit from UHI expertise for the islands.

However, the university as a key institution for the Highlands and Islands will need to ensure that island communities are kept informed through engagement and discussion and their suggestions and recommendations are taken on board in the next iteration of the strategy, so that UHI continues to be seen as a positive force within the islands and is viewed also as a university of the islands inasmuch as it is the university for the Highlands and Islands.

Iain Caimbeul
Andrew Jennings
Siún Carden

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