

BOOK REVIEWS

At Last - a University of the Highlands and Islands.

UHI - THE MAKING OF A UNIVERSITY

Graham Hills and Robin Lingard

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WITHIN THREE or four years or so Scotland should - at long and weary last - be able to lay claim to a university indubitably set in and specifically designed for the Highlands and Islands. Given the sclerotic, careerist and cheapskate wastelands to which so many of our traditional institutions of higher education are presently reduced, this may be counted as something of a miracle.

It will also serve as testament to the vision and enduring energy of a host of public agencies from the Millennium Commission to the Open University (though not many other universities), and from Highland Council and its predecessor to Highlands and Islands Enterprise (and its predecessor too, in the shape of the Highlands and Islands Development Board).

And when - as is likely - UHI is allowed sometime in this decade to validate its own degree courses, and thereby assumes the mantle of a modest but fully-fledged university, there will be cause to mark the gigantic contribution made to educational provision in the Highlands by Graham Hills and Robin Lingard, joint authors of the title presently under review.

These men know their stuff - as indeed they should. Lingard specialised in high-tech industrial policy at a senior level in the Civil

Service, and was first director of the UHI Project, as it was known in its early days. And Hills - a former member of Downing Street's Advisory Council on Science and Technology - is a onetime Principal and Vice Chancellor of the University of Strathclyde.

The idea of a university in the Scottish north is nothing new, of course. The town-council of Inverness favoured one as early as the 1830s, and there was similar sort of talk towards the end of the 19th century. Post World War Two, Inverness was again demanding a fifth (as it then would have been) university for Scotland, located in the Highlands; and the local authorities returned to the matter in the 1960s, decade of the famous Robbins Report into the future of higher education in Britain. In the event, however, the one brand-new university proposed for Scotland went to Stirling.

But the Highlands and Islands Development Board, established by Labour in 1965, campaigned for the idea over the next 25 years. And the hope survived the Board's transition of identity to Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 1991, in which year Graham Hills became academic adviser to the UHI Project (with Robin Lingard coming aboard the following year as director).

Very quickly, it became clear that nobody was proposing an old-style university transported lock, stock and Livingstone Tower to the wide and well-cleared spaces of 'Europe's last wilderness'.

Hills and Lingard, respectively the well-polished product of a traditional higher education at London and Cambridge, are savage in their critique of traditional approaches to learning. As Hills writes in an appendix to the book, universities are the 'great survivors'.

'They can boast nearly a millennium of uninterrupted existence in Europe. Over that period almost all other public and private institutions have withered away. Frontiers moved, ideologies

blossomed and faded, but universities remained intact and untouched until the present day. The very idea of a new kind of university might therefore seem a contradiction in terms’.

But by the beginning of the ‘nineties, it was already clear that developments in communications technology might make possible untried approaches to pedagogy: and would certainly have a literally shattering effect on established educational practices and structures. So why not design from scratch a university for the 21st century, which would match Highland needs in terms of the local labour-market, help prevent the endless and uni-directional drain of educable talent (much of it involuntary) to the wine-bars of Byres Road and Hanover Street, and act generally as an economic, technological and intellectual blood-transfusion for the region?

By 1992, then, the main lines of development were clear. In terms of management, the proposed university would draw on the existing providers of formal post-school education in the Highlands, such as the further-education colleges.

‘The model most favoured is that of a distributed network of independent colleges linked to a small administrative hub it should endeavour to take the form of a dispersed network of near-autonomous satellites, each reflecting local needs and local interests and each inputting into the network as well as receiving course components from it’.

As Hills (anticipating with enormous prescience the academic implications of the Internet) wrote as early as 1992, ‘The academic programmes of the new university will make great use of recent developments in educational practice, namely open learning, distance learning, modularisation, course credit transfer and course credit accumulation. The vehicle for much of the knowledge transfer

will be the new Integrated Systems Data Network, ISDN. It would be a deliberate policy of the new university to blur the present distinction between education and training. It would therefore seek to provide courses offering coherent mixtures of vocational and non-vocational studies and at levels ranging from foundation studies to the honours degree'.

Much of this was ideally attuned to the skills-development and lifelong-learning mantras of the 1990s (not all of which derived from government attempts to fiddle downwards the length of the dole-queues). Some of it, of course, might well be said to be making a virtue of necessity. Some of it also begged bigger questions than it answered - not least, the question of how it was all going to be financed. And in a decade of soaring student numbers and falling revenues in the established older-style universities, this was no mean question, no mean challenge.

The Scottish Office, staffed by career civil-servants who were all products of those old-style universities, and all past-masters in the arts of preservation of the status-quo, was unremittingly hostile (though Michael Forsyth proved to be a good friend of the UHI Project). Hostile too were the managements of nearly all of those old-style universities.

And then, in 1996, the UHI Project got the one stroke of supreme luck that it deserved. With little time to spare, an application was drafted and sent-off to the Millennium Commission. Nobody knew what might happen - or when. But everyone knew that, realistically, the future of the UHI Project was now in the balance. The response, when it came, came in the form of a very curious fusion of communications technology indeed.

‘Finally, early on 30 September, the Project director received a cryptic telephone call from the UHI case-officer at the Commission. A letter was about to be faxed through, but she could not say what would be in it. As a small group clustered by the fax machine in the corner of the officer, the atmosphere was sombre. This didn’t seem the way to convey good news. The letter that emerged was therefore all the more of a shock’.

In fact, the UHI Project got over £33 million from the Commission: the financial bedrock of the development witnessed since then. This process of development was certainly discontinuous, and the authors do not flinch from reference to the ferocious in-fighting which nearly destroyed the UHI Project in the late ‘nineties. But it was soon back on track, with formal designation by the Scottish Parliament as an institution of higher education being granted in 2001.

And at the end of the academic session 2003-2004, just over 200 students graduated with UHI degrees validated by the ever-helpful Open University. In other words, what must have seemed a near-impossible dream just 15 years ago is today very much a reality. The rest is up to UHI itself and the recently-established Scottish council for higher and further education. That - and the goodwill and assistance of the Scottish parliament.

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