



UNICREDS

University Collaboration in Regional Development Spaces

UNICREDS key objectives

- Transform regions with underperforming economies through the creation of a new model for economic development
- Share experience to identify good practices in collaboration between universities, SMEs and larger business and the public sector
- Develop these good practices into a transferable model for regional economic development
- Integrate the model into regional, national and European policy

UNICREDS partners

Cornwall, UK

Cornwall Council: www.cornwall.gov.uk
Combined Universities in Cornwall:
www.cuc.ac.uk

Hadjú Bihar, Hungary

University of Debrecen Centre for Environmental Management and Policy:
www.envm.unideb.hu
Hadjú Bihar Regional Authority:
www.hbmo.hu

North Central Region, Bulgaria

Ministry of Regional Development and Public Works: www.mrrb.government.bg
Sofia University: www.uni-sofia.bg

Northern Sweden

Council of Skellefteå: www.skelleftea.se
Regional Council of Västerbotten:
www.regionvasterbotten.se
Akademi Norr Association of Municipalities: www.akademinorr.se

Scotland, UK

University of Highlands & Islands:
www.uhi.ac.uk

Seinäjoki, Finland

City of Seinäjoki: www.seinajoki.fi
University Consortium of Seinäjoki:
www.uks.fi
Seinäjoki Technology Centre Ltd:
www.stoy.fi/en

South Bohemia, Czech Republic

University of South Bohemia: www.jcu.cz
South Bohemian Regional Authority:
www.kraj-jihocesky.cz



Can Universities Benefit Rural Communities?

Harnessing the opportunity for Universities to drive smart specialisation in regional development

Sabhal Mòr Ostaig UHI, Isle of Skye

Tuesday 7th June 2011

The third UNICREDS conference recently took place in Scotland to discuss how universities can benefit rural communities.

The conference was led by the Combined Universities in Cornwall and hosted by the University of the Highlands and Islands. Located in the beautiful surroundings at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig UHI, Skye, the conference brought together delegates from six European countries to debate and question the role of universities in rural communities, with particular focus on how universities can drive smart specialisation in regional development and boost the local economy.

The conference was opened by **James Fraser, Principal & Vice Chancellor of the University of the Highlands and Islands** and **Professor Boyd Robertson, Principal of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig**. The conference was chaired by **Nigel Hewitt, Co-ordinator at the Combined Universities in Cornwall**.



Benefits of higher education for regional development

Professor Norman Sharp OBE, Former director QAA Scotland



Speaking in a personal capacity, Professor Sharp examined some of the key ideas behind the university as an agent in regional development. Exogenous development takes advantage of economies of scale and concentration and is typified by urban growth and rural depopulation, with a focus for rural development in agricultural modernisation. Endogenous development harnesses local resources for sustainable development and is typified by diversity, local initiative and a focus on capacity building. The socio-economic diversity of Europe's rural regions today means that there is no single problem to address; a new model is emerging, neo-endogenous development, supporting the rural economy in relating to the external environment (local, national and EU government, agencies like Highlands and Islands Enterprise which links business to university knowledge). Universities have a key role to play, both in terms of direct economic impact and through the potential they offer to act as a mediator between the communities where they are based and other universities and key agencies. Reference: Biggar Report, showing the economic impact of UHI:

<http://www.uhi.ac.uk/home/about-uhi/publications/the-university-of-the-highlands-and-islands-economic-impact-report-2011.pdf>

Panel debate: Embedding Economic and Community Benefits of higher education - A stakeholder perspective

Willy Roe, Chairman, Highlands and Islands Enterprise

Nathan Shields, President, UHI Students' Association

James Fraser, Principal & Vice Chancellor, University of the Highlands and Islands

Stuart Black, Director of Planning and Development, The Highland Council

Chaired by Professor Kate Leyshon, University of Exeter

During their introductions, the panel members raised issues of rural depopulation and 'brain drain'; ensuring sustainable, confident communities; providing education at the right level for the needs of the region's students, both school-leavers and mature students; encouraging and developing an entrepreneurial mindset; supporting business start-ups and SMEs; and resourcing key sectors of the region's industries. Questions were taken from the audience.



The panel

The organic growth of entrepreneurship within a region is not fast. Does the future growth of the economy depend on importing business to the Highlands and Islands?

Stuart Black and Willy Roe: Inward investment is now related to expertise in HE and research (science and technology) and to the natural environment, and is more sustainable. We continue to support inward investment – e.g. renewable offshore energy companies – but the future is based more on rural development through start-up businesses and small businesses. We need education systems, from school-age upwards, to create a mindset that makes entrepreneurship attractive to people.

Twenty years from now, what proportion of the indigenous population do you think will be educated at UHI?

James Fraser: I have no idea – but I hope that a huge proportion will want to stay and have their education here. Technology means that courses like the renewable energy BSc will have access to the knowledge and expertise of the whole academic population of UHI without necessarily leaving Stornoway.

How do you balance the regional development needs that UHI aims to meet with the desire to be an academically successful university in global terms?

James Fraser and Nathan Shields: As a member of Universities Scotland, the pull is to be like the other members. We can enshrine in the constitution of the university the characteristics that give the community a means to hold us to account. But we want the university to be credible in global terms so we need some parts of it to be publishing etc. The uniqueness of UHI's students will shape the university and provide the grounding necessary to maintain the balance between academic credibility and serving regional communities.

Case study: South Bohemia, Czech Republic

Associate Professor Eva Cudlinova, University of South Bohemia

The region of South Bohemia has a relatively low population density and a rural landscape punctuated by artificial lakes. The region suffers from poor infrastructure and low skill levels in IT and foreign languages. The university is working to serve traditional community needs and to improve competitiveness.

There are currently 12,000 students at the University of South Bohemia; around 62% of applications are from local students and 30% are flexible/distance learners.

Regional development work is done through the university's individual faculties as each has the potential to reach a specific sector. The University helps with grant applications from Local Action Groups – without this assistance, funds available to lagging regions for economic development are often inaccessible because the region lacks the skills to

apply for and use funding. The University also owns the South Bohemian Research Technical Park, which facilitates cooperation with businesses; however there are still difficulties in communication.



Case study: Cornwall, United Kingdom

Dr Sue Brownlow, Director, Combined Universities in Cornwall

CUC is a partnership of 6 institutions providing higher and further education to 12,000 students in Cornwall. Approximately half of those students are local;



CUC aims to educate local students as well as bringing in students and academic expertise from around the world.

Cornwall has a rural, coastal environment; economic prosperity has increased over the past 10 years but GDP per capita is still 25% below the EU average and our graduate skills base lags behind the rest of the UK. However, the business environment is changing rapidly, especially in knowledge-intensive sectors. The CUC journey towards smart specialisation began following Objective 1 funding to build basic university capacity. Future plans needed to be financially sustainable for HE partners, relevant to the local private sector and fit with

government policy on national and international growth areas. The result has been a shift towards driving specific economic growth e.g. innovation centres and sector-specific research centres. We now need to convert that activity to mainstream research funding, to reduce dependency on Convergence.

UNICREDS partners now have evidence, which was not available when CUC started, to promote HE as a key driver for economic growth. The challenge is to bring the evidence together to present compelling reasons for policy changes in Europe.


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For more information: www.unicreds.eu

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