



» CASE STUDY: UHI WEST HIGHLAND, UHI NORTH HIGHLAND AND UHI OUTER HEBRIDES

ERG PROGRAMME – PHASE 1

Assisting three UHI Colleges with positioning their proposed merger as a regional economic anchor institution.

Partners

UHI West Highland, UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides, Skills Development Scotland (SDS)

Focus

Working closely with the senior leaders of the three UHI Colleges to assist them with positioning the new merged college as an anchor institution and a key partner in its functioning economic geography.

Success Factors

- Assisted the development of a shared understanding amongst the leadership teams of the three colleges of their current contributions to the development of their diverse economic areas.

- Built on the case for a merged college for the Highlands and Outer Hebrides by highlighting the additional positive impact the single body should have on the economic renewal and transformation of the communities it will serve.
- Supported the leadership teams of the three colleges as they defined the role the merged college should expect to have as a key partner in designing and delivering regional and sub regional economic strategies and associated growth deals.

Brief Description

- Held session with UHI leaders to identify the key challenges facing the organisations across its extensive area of operation with a focus on its role as a partner in delivering economic renewal.
- Facilitated detailed investigative discussions with the principals of UHI West Highland, UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides to examine how the new merged college could enhance its contribution to securing inclusive economic growth and demonstrate to its partners the major role it will play in designing and delivering regional economic strategies.
- Facilitated a session at a senior leadership team workshop of the three colleges with a focus on the opportunities for the new merged body of bringing additionality to inclusive economic renewal and transformation and the collaborative action it could initiate with its partners to this end. The following lines of inquiry provided the framework for the session:
 - What should the role of the new college be in setting the economic development agenda for its region?
 - Do stakeholders and communities share this view?
 - Does the college need to shift attitudes and perceptions?
 - What are the challenges and opportunities for the new college as it establishes itself as a key regional partner?
 - How will the college align its objectives with those of regional economic partnerships?

Challenges and Solutions

In setting the context of the ERG Team's work with UHI West Highland, UHI North Highland and UHI Outer Hebrides it is important to highlight that UHI's institutional boundary covers seven local authorities and five Growth Deal regions: Inverness and Highlands, Moray, Islands, Argyll and Tay Cities. It is also a member of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (COHI) and is affected by two Regional Skills Investment Plans (RSIPs) and several related Regional Skills Assessments (RSAs).

Although a Regional Economic Partnership (REP) for the Highlands and Islands was established at the turn of 2021-22 its functioning area is confined to that of COHI, i.e. smaller than the operational boundaries of UHI. There is, as yet, no overarching Regional Economic Strategy (RES) for the Highlands and Islands. There is a Skills Leadership Forum to oversee the Highlands and Islands Skills Investment Plan, as well as individual local authority economic plans; but until a single RES is place it will remain unclear how this ties in with wider strategic priorities for the whole region.

As a regional, multi-partner and multi-campus, tertiary institution, it was noted that UHI's role is broader than that of a regional college or a regional university; it encompasses the full range of education and qualification provision across the whole of the SCFQ framework for access and national qualifications, vocational and work based qualifications, degrees and postgraduate qualifications, along with a research and innovation capability and hard-wired knowledge exchange. It was created as an explicitly regional university with its role in regional economic development long recognised and supported by its partners.

In preliminary discussions it was noted by workshop participants that they were working in a fragmented organisational environment lacking an overarching strategic context, shared priorities and outcomes for their sub-region. It was observed that this appeared to hinder effective business engagement with regional and sub-regional programmes and funding



streams. It was noted that the new merged college would be well placed to promote a simplification and prioritisation of initiatives driven by a shared mission for regional economic transformation.

Based on the programme's team's engagement with the three colleges, there is appetite to see the new single institution celebrate and promote the diversity of the rural, coastal and island communities it will serve, and reflect in its offer learning that matches the variety of employment opportunities available in each. The merger is seen as an excellent opportunity to be innovative and look at different ways of delivering learning that combines the benefits of scale and the close connection with the needs of local labour markets and the communities they sustain.

➤ **“Working with the CDN’s Economic Recovery Group Programme has assisted us with exploring what it will mean to be a leading partner in the development of regional and sub-regional strategies and bring additionality to the delivery of plans for economic renewal and transformation.”**

Lydia Rohmer, Principal & Chief Executive,
UHI West Highland

There is general agreement that the new single college will need to be a leading partner in the development of regional and sub-regional strategies and delivery plans for economic renewal and transformation. The two growth deals (Inverness and Highlands; Islands) and associated skills assessments and employability plans should provide platforms for this level of engagement.

The area of operation benefits from being nationally and internationally relevant as a location for innovation in key sectors of the blue and green economies. As such the new college could also enhance its role as a major partner in attracting inward investment by demonstrating its agility in meeting the demand for a higher skilled workforce by working with businesses to tailor learning to meet their needs. This would support retaining the local workforce, especially young people, building community resilience and contribute to increasing productivity along with community wealth building to ensure lasting benefits for the communities in terms of place and prosperity.

College leaders emphasised that it will be especially important for the new college to raise the profile of skills gaps and needs for the diverse Highland and Island communities it serves to counterbalance the pull of Inverness and the communities covered by UHI in the east and south, and the associated draw

of the Inverness and Highlands Growth Deal. To this end, the merger will provide an opportunity to refresh the college's engagement in developing local skills plans for the communities it serves and to secure equitable funding and investment outcomes.

The ERG-led sessions highlighted a number of challenges that need to be overcome such as time for college staff to engage strategically, financial pressures and tension between funding models and delivery models, and the need to deepen collaboration, as equal partners, with other universities that have programmes and projects based in the Highlands.

Impact

Throughout the ERG programme team's work with the three colleges, a recurring theme was the additional benefits a single body would bring to its remote, coastal and island communities and the opportunity this presented to becoming a significant regional player.

The ERG sessions helped college leaders explore what it will mean in practice to be a leading partner

➤ **“By facilitating self-reflective and honest conversations amongst the leaders of the three existing colleges the ERG Programme has given us much food for thought on how we present our full business case and develop our future strategy.”**

Lydia Rohmer, Principal & Chief Executive,
UHI West Highland

in the development of regional and sub-regional strategies and bring additionality to the delivery of plans for economic renewal and transformation.

The programme team also assisted leaders with their consideration of how to take practical steps towards building stronger cooperative action-focused working relations with key partners and stakeholders along with engaging with the wider UHI family as the newly merged college pivots to meet the rapidly evolving challenges across the Highlands and Islands.





Moving Forward/Next Steps

As the merger programme progresses and in tandem with the development of the full business case, there is an excellent opportunity for the Boards and SLTs of the three existing colleges to deepen their understanding of the role of the new single college as a key anchor institution and a driver of economic transformation.

The three current colleges are also well placed to bring together the local authorities, SDS, HIE, SFC, and business representatives, to initiate a discussion on the role of the merged college as key agent for meeting the region's rapidly changing skills needs. This could be set against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, Just Transition to Net Zero, the cost of living crisis and the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET).

➤ “We can also recognise the benefits of applying the ERG approach to us building stronger cooperative action-focused working relations with key partners and stakeholders.”

Lydia Rohmer, Principal & Chief Executive,
UHI West Highland

➤ Contacts and links

For further information on the ERG Programme please contact Paul Smart at:
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The ERG website can be viewed at:
www.cdn.ac.uk/economic-recovery-group



College Development Network

www.cdn.ac.uk

