

REVIEW: THE MAKING OF UHI

David Hamilton

Graham Hills and Robin Lingard, **UHI: the Making of a University**,
Edinburgh: Dunedin Academic Press, 2004, 272 pp., hb, £25, ISBN 1
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There is a difficult time in the preparation of all book reviews. It comes between reading the book and finding a framework for penning the review. Of course, it is easy to write a formulaic review using who, what, where, when, and how well. But finding a challenging leitmotif that characterises a text is never easy. In this case, however, my leitmotif is the parallel between **UHI: the Making of a University** and **Jerry Springer: the Opera**. Why? Beneath a veneer of reportage and comment both address crucial issues in civil society. **Jerry Springer: the Opera** raises issues about television as a public good; while **UHI: the Making of a University** engages with education as a public good.

I am not sure of my qualifications for writing this review. Perhaps the most important is that I am not a member of the Scottish policy community. Nevertheless, I worked on a Glasgow-based research project during the 1970s with the analogous label PHI (Project Highlands and Islands). With others, I studied science teaching in small schools from the Mull of Kintyre to the Island of Yell (Shetland). Indeed, one of the island collaborators on this project makes a cameo appearance in the subject of this review. More recently, I have been professionally involved in one of the English civic universities founded at the end of the nineteenth century (are they still civic?); and, for the last 7 years, part of my time has been taken up with working on adult education projects at Sweden's fifth university, itself located about 300km south of the Arctic Circle.

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Hills and Lingard have written a welcome and brave book. It is not a history but, as they accept, a narrative and commentary, a volume of witness. Despite using the third person throughout (e.g. 'Graham Hills suggested ...'), it is as much their story as it is an analysis of someone else's past. They were, they confess, 'profoundly involved' in recent efforts to found a new university in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland; and the appearance of their witness account, despite its intrinsic problems, is to be warmly applauded. Its existence contrasts sharply with the absence of analysis of the fate of another university – the UKeU (the UK e-University), which went from inception to bankruptcy within four years and probably qualifies as the centre-piece for a musical remake of **Clochmerle**.

It is difficult to identify the literary genre of **UHI: the Making of a University**. It is not a victory narrative; nor is it a post-mortem and, as far as I can tell, it does not fall into the Swedish category of 'revenge' literature. No doubt, all kinds of parochial scores are being settled in the narrative but, as might be expected of a former university Principal and a former civil servant, they are elegantly disguised – and of little interest to outsiders.

I read **UHI: the Making of a University** as a case study. It is a study of a particular time, place and aspiration; and it exemplifies the general case of university reform. At one level, then, the saga of UHI is a representation of local and national politics in Scotland since the expansion of higher education in the 1960s, the 'last opportunity in Britain for a fully-funded state university to be created from scratch' (p. 12). For older readers, like me, it will be a trip down memory lane, pot holes and all; for others, like future UHI students in 'eco-tourism and "green" leisure industries', it serves as a telling example of the central paradox of open systems theory – that the unpredictable should be anticipated.

This case study, however, is troubled by a simple question: what counts as a university? Different discourses or ideologies have activated this question, linking it, variously, with the creation of Bologna university as a *studium generale* in the twelfth century, Herbert Spencer's nineteenth century question of what knowledge is of most worth, or the terms of the Bologna declaration and its aspiration to produce a common educational arena in the European Community? Is it possible to combine the local and the international? Should the hierarchical overtones of 'higher' education be replaced by a flatter conception such as 'post-compulsory' education? Is it possible to combine open access to knowledge with 'new public management' ideals of value-for-money? Can the knowledge society accommodate the

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intellectual property rights central to the workings (and profitability) of the knowledge economy? Is ICT anything more than a delivery system? What conceptions of teaching and learning are appropriate to higher education in the second millennium? And, not least, should education cease to be a public good?

These ideas are abstract. Each, however, has its social implications. Will teachers cease to be 'servants of the state'? Will students model their behaviour on being a 'customer'? What are the salary, status and gender implications of ameliorating the hierarchy of the democratic intellect? What are the budgetary implications of blended learning which combines high capital costs on ICT and high running costs for technical, administrative and intellectual support? Does the spread of asynchronous teaching mean that university teachers will morph into 24/7 call-centre workers? Will overseas (outlandish) students be drawn to theme-park Scotland, or will they go where student fees are non-existent (Sweden) and winter sports facilities and central heating are better (across Canada and Scandinavia)?

Hills and Lingard's conclusion, which seems to match the state of affairs in Sweden, is to highlight the 'central role of politics'. The establishment of new universities, they suggest, 'is essentially a political matter, often involving local and national politicians. Without their blessing, little is possible. With it, all is possible' (p. 223). Moreover, they highlight two aspects of politics which are paramount: vision and flexibility. As their work demonstrates, innovation is buffeted by all kinds of interventions. Yet, there is a need to keep the wider horizon in view, to keep thinking outside the box and, in the process, keep ahead of the game.

This is what Hills and Lingard did in the years they worked with the UHI idea (1991–1997). But, as they also demonstrate, the game and its players are constantly changing. The boundaries of the landscape of learning are never secure. They are subject to incursions; and, in the process, both the form and the content of the boundaries are reshaped and re-formed. At the same time, there is always a need for visionaries, borrowers who can recognise straws in the wind, identify the turbulence that activate them and, not least, harness a vision to these social flows. Such a synthesis is a long game. Hill and Lindgard survived. They had a good innings. Their work is worthy of an account such as this.

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