

University of the Highlands and Islands

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**GAELIC TEACHER EDUCATION IN THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS AND HOW UHI BECAME A TEACHER EDUCATION INSTITUTE**

**Abstract**

This is a story about how teacher education came to the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, and how the initial emphasis on Gaelic-medium education came to be over-shadowed by English. It is a story of how collaboration grew between one of Scotland’s long-established universities and its newest and how teacher education took root in the Highlands and Islands. It looks at how the hoped for increase in the numbers of teachers able to teach through Gaelic has failed to keep pace with the growth in Gaelic-medium education, and how the impact that it was intended the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) would have on Gaelic teacher education has failed to materialise. It is a story with a long list of characters, some political brinkmanship, and one still to run its course.

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Alasdair Morrison, Brian Wilson, Annie Macsween, David Green, DK MacLeod,

Matthew Maciver, Douglas Weir, Douglas Ansdell, Iain Smith, Robert Cormack,

Mary Andrew, Janet Hackel, Seonag MacKinnon, Mona Wilson, Lynda Keith, Ann C MacKay, Mairi MacLeod, Rosemary Ward, Rhiannon Tinsley, Issy Grieve and Neil Simco.

**Methodology**

I have relied on my own records of the time and also on the recollections of key individuals; these have been a mixture of face-to-face and telephone interviews. Where direct contact has not been possible I have engaged in email correspondence.

Inevitably finding accurate records on events that go back nearly 20 years ago has not been easy and I am indebted to all those individuals who have been generous with their recollections and particularly to those who pointed me in the direction of other source material. However, our memories are not always reliable (especially my own) and I do not claim to have captured every detail of the story. Any mistakes in the chronology of events and their interpretation are entirely my own.

**Some Background**

“….anecdotes can be telling, though you have to keep them under tight rein.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Between 1982 and 1984 a group of mothers of pre-school age children ran a pre-school playgroup for the communities of Callanish and Breasclete on the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles of Scotland. The women, all native speakers of Gaelic, had raised their children with Gaelic as a first language. At the time Comhairle nan Eilean (the Western Isles Council) operated a primary school bi-lingual education policy. In the rural schools of Lewis (outside of the main town of Stornoway) it was not uncommon for children to be taught in both English and Gaelic, but much depended on the linguistic capabilities and resourcefulness of individual primary school teachers. The Bi-lingual Education Project (BEP), begun in 1975 by John Murray and Dr Finlay MacLeod as part of the Education Department of Comhairle nan Eilean, invested heavily in providing resources and support to teachers to buttress their Gaelic language skills, while recognising that children needed to be fluent in both languages. One of its most significant (and long-lasting) achievements was the establishment of Acair, the Gaelic publishing company. Under the guidance of John Murray and Dr Finlay MacLeod, Acair[[2]](#footnote-2) wrote and published Gaelic educational materials for use by the BEP in Western Isles schools. John Murray and Dr Finlay MacLeod were also the architects of the Western Isles Community Education Project (CEP), intended to work in tandem with the BEP.

During this time arguments about Gaelic-medium education (GME), as opposed to bi-lingual education, were topical and heated. Comhairle nan Sgoiltean Àraich (the Gaelic Pre-school Playgroups Association) and Comunn na Gàidhlig (the national Gaelic organisation) argued that only a commitment to GME could ensure that future generations of children would be Gaelic-speaking. The group of mothers in Callanish and Breasclete, meanwhile, were concerned about what would happen to their Gaelic-speaking children when they entered the local village school; the then Primary One (P1) teacher spoke little Gaelic. They wanted their children to have a thorough grounding in Gaelic before they learned English as they moved on through their primary school years.

With help from the CEP the women successfully campaigned for the Western Isles first Gaelic-medium P1 class; it opened in August 1984 in Breasclete Primary School.

In many Western Isles rural primary schools the bi-lingual education policy had been successful, especially where teachers felt comfortable and confident working in both languages. The BEP had developed many Gaelic language materials (hitherto there had been precious little specifically aimed at primary children) and the Community Education Project also produced Gaelic resources for playgroups and primary schools. But the generation of teachers, comfortable with Gaelic in the classroom, was nearing retirement and many younger teachers, even though native speakers of Gaelic, lacked the linguistic confidence of their older peers. As some rural schools closed in the 1980’s and 90’s often in buildings around 100 years old[[3]](#footnote-3), and the older generation of native Gaelic- speaking teachers retired, it became more difficult for Comhairle nan Eilean to sustain the policy of bi-lingual primary education. Neither did it help that the then Director of Education, Neil Galbraith, was not committed to continuing the BEP.

The success of the Callanish and Breasclete women’s campaign in 1984, gave confidence to other parent groups in the Western Isles that their children could similarly be educated through the medium of Gaelic. These demands were replicated on the Scottish mainland where the local education authorities in Highland and Glasgow were quick to respond. The first all Gaelic-medium primary school opened in Glasgow in 1985, to be followed later by schools in Inverness and Edinburgh[[4]](#footnote-4).

Throughout the last years of the 20th century the demand for primary school teachers able to teach through the medium of Gaelic grew steadily as more parents expressed the wish that their children be educated through Gaelic. At the same time the two universities providing primary school teacher education (Strathclyde and Aberdeen) were experiencing difficulty in recruiting students fluent in Gaelic. Also of concern to the General Teaching Council of Scotland (GTCS) were the numbers of students successfully completing their qualifications to teach through the medium of Gaelic, but subsequently opting to teach in English. This only compounded the problems of demand outstripping supply.

As successive census information has shown, the number of fluent Gaelic speakers continues to fall[[5]](#footnote-5) but, perhaps somewhat perversely, the number of children entering Gaelic-medium education due to parental preference has steadily increased; many of these parents are not Gaelic speakers.

In May 1998 the GTCS held a seminar at its Edinburgh Headquarters on Gaelic medium education. Matthew Maciver, then Depute Registrar at the GTCS invited Brian Wilson, MP, and then Scottish Office Minister for Education (1997-98) to address the seminar. Matthew is a native speaker of Gaelic who was concerned about the ability of the Universities of Aberdeen and Strathclyde to meet the demands for Gaelic-medium primary teachers. Although Brian Wilson represented an Ayrshire parliamentary constituency, he was no stranger to the politics of GME; in the 1980s, he had written the Labour Party's Gaelic policy which encouraged local authorities to introduce Gaelic-medium education. Brian has lived in the Isle of Lewis for many years and is a parent who has experienced both bi-lingual education and GME.

At the GTC seminar he spoke of his own parental experiences and how he wished to encourage the GTCS and Scottish Office to identify those registered teachers who were Gaelic speakers and who might retrain as GM teachers, teaching their specialist subject in Gaelic. He felt then (and still does) that building primary Gaelic-medium provision was of limited benefit unless continued in to secondary schooling[[6]](#footnote-6).

In November 1999 GTCS published a report on Gaelic Medium Education as a direct consequence of the May 1998 Seminar. Amongst its recommendations was:

*“Setting up a new teacher education institution within the University of the Highlands and Islands (sic), with particular responsibility for Gaelic-medium education.”[[7]](#footnote-7)*

At this point in the story UHI had yet to gain university title; officially it was designated a Higher Education Institute, and known then as “UHI Millennium Institute”[[8]](#footnote-8). It consisted of a federation of 14 Further Education colleges and some research institutes spread throughout the Highlands and Islands of the north of Scotland; from Shetland College in the north to Perth College in the south, and from Lews Castle College in Stornoway in the west to Moray College in Elgin in the east. It is a geographical area equivalent to Belgium with a population the size of Brussels. The only UHI colleges where Gaelic was spoken were Lews Castle College in Stornoway, Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye, Lochaber College[[9]](#footnote-9) in Fort William and Argyll College in Lochgilphead and Oban; of these only Sabhal Mor Ostaig in Skye taught all its curriculum subjects through the medium of Gaelic.

Much of the UHI estate consisted of buildings erected in the 1960s and 70s; many were unfit for an institution bidding for university status. Lews Castle College in Stornoway opened in 1953 as a college training young men for careers at sea and in carpentry and boat building. In the intervening years it expanded and in 1997 became the first UHI partner college to offer an undergraduate degree[[10]](#footnote-10). At its Executive Office in Inverness UHI launched an ambitious programme of modernising its estate with financial assistance from the Millennium Commission. The largest building project was in Stornoway where nearly £14m was invested in Lews Castle College. The new buildings were formally opened on November 1, 2000 by Alasdair Morrison, MSP, and Minister for Gaelic in the new Scottish Parliament. Alasdair was accompanied by Brian Wilson, then Minister of Technology in the UK Parliament and Dr Sam Galbraith, MSP and Minister for the Environment in the Scottish Parliament[[11]](#footnote-11).

**Alasdair Morrison MSP and the 1 November 2000 Announcement**

Behind the scenes, and following publication of the GTCS report on Gaelic Medium Education in November 1999, Alasdair Morrison (with assistance from Brian Wilson) had been working with Scottish Executive civil servants on plans to address the shortage of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) Gaelic-medium students. His attention had been focussed by Annie Macsween, then leader of the UHI BA Gaelic degree, which was delivered jointly by Lews Castle College and Sabhal Mor Ostaig. The majority of the 12 students due to graduate in the summer of 2001 wanted to progress to a one year teacher education qualification and Annie kept up the pressure on Alasdair Morrison over the measures he would take to support Gaelic-medium education. Annie writes:

*“One of the main reasons for my insistence that a course be made available was the fact that many of the students were adult returners with responsibilities for children and aged parents. Ideal teacher material, but they could not easily leave the island. I was aware of their interest in becoming teachers but without the course being available on the islands they could not continue.”*

This pressure culminated in a telephone call from Brian Wilson to Matthew Maciver at the GTC on November 1. Matthew Maciver learned that at the opening of the new buildings at Lews Castle College that evening, there would be an announcement that Lews Castle College and the University of Strathclyde would be collaborating on a new ITE course for primary school Gaelic-medium teachers. This was a significant moment in Scottish Education, especially so as neither Lews Castle College nor the University of Strathclyde, including Boyd Robertson, the senior Gaelic lecturer at Jordanhill, knew anything about it. With some nervous trepidation, as Alasdair Morrison later described, he made his pitch.

*“I am delighted to announce that from next Autumn (2001), LCC is going to take a lead role in collaboration with Jordanhill College[[12]](#footnote-12) to ensure that Post-graduate Certificate courses in education are to be available at LCC. This is an excellent breakthrough: there are many people in the islands who would like to do a teacher training certificate, but due to family commitments cannot be expected to be away from home for a year. The lack of teachers is one of the biggest challenges facing Gaelic, and this development, I believe, is one of the most significant I have had the pleasure of announcing. I would expect, in time, Sabhal Mor Ostaig, under the auspices of UHI, to be offering exactly the same course.”*

*Alasdair Morrison, MSP. Scottish Executive*

*“As Education Minister at the former Scottish Office, I took the decision back in 1997 that significant capital investment was required to bring facilities at the [Lews Castle] College up to acceptable modern standards.*

*“Education has always been valued in the islands, but education used, in the past, to take people away from here. Now that can be reversed. It is now not only possible to get people to stay here and gain qualifications…. It has always been wrong that people had to go away from Gaelic-speaking communities in order to become Gaelic teachers. That was a real anomaly that has now been addressed. There are lots of women who have gained qualifications …. who wanted to become Gaelic-medium teachers without leaving their families. It is a good common sense move.”*

*Brian Wilson, MP. Minister of State, UK Government*

Alasdair Morrison recalls that in the minutes immediately before his announcement civil servants advised him against making any announcement on ITE. However, his political colleagues, Brian Wilson and Sam Galbraith, with more experience of dealing with civil servants, advised Alasdair to go ahead,on the basis that once the announcement had been made, civil servants would fall in behind the Minister. Flanked by his two ministerial colleagues, Alasdair certainly did not want for support in making his announcement.

The West Highland Free Press in its edition of November 9, 2000, covered the story with a headline “Gaelic Medium Breakthrough”

*“The news that Post-graduate teaching qualifications are to be available through Lews Castle College has been hailed as the biggest breakthrough for Gaelic-medium education services since its inception in the mid 1980’s…The immediate beneficiaries will be drawn from the 12 students who are at present in the 3rd year of the Gaelic degree course in Stornoway. …. The courses would be run in conjunction with the University of Strathclyde – of which Jordanhill is now a part …… would give them immediate credibility”*

*“The Minister said that at the end of last year (1999) UHI had approached him with a proposal to develop initial teacher education. Lews Castle College had put forward a proposal for a collaborative arrangement with Jordanhill to secure a substantial increase in the number of Gaelic speaking teachers in training.”*

It appeared as if the pressure applied by Annie Macsween had paid off. Annie is well known in the Gaidhealtachd and had been active in Gaelic language and community development issues for many years. A fluent Gaelic speaker from Ness in the north of Lewis, she had taught Gaelic at the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway before becoming a community worker in Ness for the Western Isles Community Education Project (1977-81), and latterly coming to Lews Castle College UHI as Senior Gaelic Lecturer.

At that time enrolling on an ITE course meant either a one year (PGCE) or a four year (BEd) commitment in either the Central belt or the east coast; for personal and domestic reasons, for these students, that simply was not an option. It had long been a bone of contention among some teacher educators that no centres for ITE existed outside of the Central Belt (Glasgow, Paisley and Edinburgh) and the east coast (Aberdeen and Dundee).

When Alasdair Morrison referred in his announcement to an “approach from Lews Castle” it was the 12 students on the UHI BA Gaelic degree that he had in mind. Paradoxically, however, they were not to benefit from his news; it would be some years yet before the new course for Gaelic primary teachers would materialise.

Douglas Weir, (now Professor Emeritus at the University of Strathclyde), recalls that as then Dean of the Faculty of Education at Strathclyde he had one conversation with Alasdair Morrison MSP during the period 1999-2000 about Gaelic medium teacher education, but though there was goodwill (on both sides) there were no resources forthcoming from the Scottish Executive with which to make the new course a reality. Like the Principal at LCC, David Green, Douglas had been given no prior indication of Alasdair Morrison’s announcement.

The civil servant responsible for Gaelic, Douglas Ansdell says that funding was later approved for the new course by the Scottish Executive, to assist with the development of what he referred to as Strathclyde’s “*off-campus course* “.[[13]](#footnote-13)However, the delays in accessing government support for the proposed new course were to lead to a longer lead-in time than anyone had foreseen at the time.

Also present at the opening of the new LCC building in Stornoway on November 1, 2000 was the Principal of Sabhal Mor Ostaig, Norman Gillies. The relationship between LCC and SMO has been characterised by a watchful wariness, not always mutually beneficial. While historically LCC has looked to Glasgow and the University of Strathclyde for alliances, SMO has traditionally looked east to the University of Aberdeen. Suffice to say that Alasdair Morrison’s announcement that night did little to bolster good relations between SMO and LCC.

The Depute Principal at Lews Castle College, DK MacLeod, was supportive of Annie Macsween’s initiative with the MSP. He recalls how discussions took place with Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to ensure that in the event of the new course starting, ITE students would be able to have their school placement experience in the Western Isles.

**After the announcement**

In the immediate aftermath of the Minister’s announcement, and the publicity surrounding it, there was a flurry of activity between the various agencies involved, not least Lews Castle College, UHI, the University of Strathclyde and the General Teaching Council. From the correspondence of the time it is clear that Lews Castle College hoped the Faculty of Education at the University of Strathclyde would make 10 places available for a Gaelic-medium PGCE course from September 2001. For its part, Strathclyde maintained that this could only happen with the release of additional funding from the Scottish Executive, and that no assurances had so far been received.

In the early months of 2001 the Executive Office of UHI (based in Inverness) became steadily more involved in discussions. Austin Reed, Academic Director of UHI, was anxious to involve Sabhal Mor Ostaig, as well as to invite Highland Council who were experiencing an acute shortage of Primary teachers able to teach through Gaelic.

For the senior staff in the UHI Executive Office these discussions involved a delicate balancing act; they did not wish to create disharmony with another important supporter, the University of Aberdeen and they were aware that the Director of Education for the Highland Council, Bruce Robertson had misgivings about the ability of the University of Strathclyde to successfully deliver a course in the Highlands and Islands[[14]](#footnote-14). Sabhal Mor Ostaig, while wanting to show support for the initiative, were similarly wary about the University of Strathclyde, favouring a more direct alliance with the University of Aberdeen. When it comes to academic alliances Scotland has been nothing if not territorial.

The outlook improved in April 2001 with a letter from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to Principals of Higher Education Institutions, including UHI[[15]](#footnote-15).This signalled an increase in the overall student numbers into initial teacher education for 2001-02, but also contained;

*“The Minister for Gaelic has indicated that he would welcome the recognition of links between existing HEIs and FE colleges in the Highlands and Islands. The Council is aware that the University of Strathclyde has been exploring collaborative Gaelic medium ITE provision with colleges in the Highlands and Islands. Therefore, in order to support the delivery of additional Gaelic medium ITE in the geographic areas with the greatest need, an additional 10 funded places have been awarded to the University of Strathclyde at PGCE Primary level for Gaelic medium provision.”*

While this was good news, it transpired that a different interpretation was applied by the University of Strathclyde. The Dean informed Lews Castle College, Comhairle nan Eilean and Highland Council that nine out of the ten new places had already been filled for entry in August 2001 and that a new course delivered in the Highlands and Islands would only be possible in the following year, 2002-03[[16]](#footnote-16)

Two further events took place in the spring of 2001 which were to have far-reaching consequences for Gaelic medium education in the Highlands and Islands. Both involved the placing of Gaelic-speaking men from the Isle of Lewis into positions from where they were to have a direct influence on future events.

Matthew Maciver, Depute Convenor at the General Teaching Council for Scotland, became Registrar and Chief Executive Officer at the GTC at the start of the 9th Council in March 2001. Matthew was the first holder of this position to be a Gaelic speaker and recognised the important role for the GTC in promoting Gaelic-medium education, especially the accreditation of new ITE programmes, and shifting the emphasis on teacher education northward and away from the Central Belt and the east coast.

In the spring of 2001 the Faculty of Education at the University of Strathclyde held the triennial election of Dean. The election was won by Iain R.M. Smith, originally from Ness in the Isle of Lewis. In the two terms for which Iain served as Dean he was to play an influential role in shaping the relationship between the University of Strathclyde and the University of the Highlands and Islands, and also in how UHI was finally to become accredited as a provider of teacher education.

**2001 - 2004**

Throughout the first half of 2001 letters continued to be exchanged between the central players. Meetings also took place between the two UHI colleges (Lews Castle and Sabhal Mor Ostaig) and representatives of the two main local authorities involved, Comhairle nan Eilean and the Highland Council. The decision by the University of Strathclyde, that no new course could be offered, at the earliest, until the academic year 2002-03, was accepted, if reluctantly in UHI and its partner colleges[[17]](#footnote-17).

A meeting was convened in Stornoway by the Principal of Lews Castle College, David Green took on 6th June, 2001, where it was agreed:

*“The next step is the development and delivery of a PGCE (Primary) course, similar to the existing courses, but which would largely be delivered through the medium of Gaelic and available via UHI, initially at Lews Castle College. This course would also qualify teachers to teach in mainstream…..The course would require to be developed by a Teacher Education Institution in conjunction with Lews Castle College, via the University of the Highlands and Islands (sic)…..The programme will be delivered through a mixed mode of lectures, seminars, distance learning materials and work-based assignments. Some lectures may be delivered through video-conferencing……”*

The 18 weeks of school experience (teaching practice) would be done in schools in the Western Isles. It had already been agreed between the University of Strathclyde and Comhairle nan Eilean that those Gaelic-medium students enrolling in August 2001 would undertake their school experience in the Western Isles.

Professor Weir, Dean of the Faculty of Education at Strathclyde, did not attend this meeting. He was no doubt conscious that his tenure as Dean was to conclude shortly and instead, sent two colleagues, Graham White (Head of PGCE programme and then Head of the Primary Education Department, and Mona Wilson, a lecturer in Gaelic medium education.

At this time changes were also taking place in UHI Millennium Institute. Professor Robert J. Cormack, Pro-Vice Chancellor of Queens University College, Belfast, was appointed Director and Chief Executive of UHI. At the GTC Matthew Maciver decided to contact him.

*“I read about Bob’s appointment in the Scotsman early one morning and phoned him at Queens University. I explained that there was an opportunity here for the UHIMI to be involved in a situation which was worrying but had great potential. I invited him to visit me in my office in Edinburgh and he did so, within days of his appointment. That meeting at the GTCS was a significant one in creating a new world in the training of Gaelic teachers.”*

Mathew Maciver also prepared a briefing paper on Gaelic Teacher Education for Professor Cormack, urging that UHI and the GTC should work together on proposals for “*the beginning of session 2002-23.”[[18]](#footnote-18)*

At the UHI Academic Council, Gaelic teacher education was to become an early focus of the new Director. Professor Cormack was keen to work with David Green in Stornoway to see how UHI could take up the opportunities referred to by Matthew Maciver. He invited Sally Brown, Professor Emeritus at Stirling University to join UHI’s Academic Council as an external member and to prepare a report to the Academic Council on Gaelic and Teacher Education[[19]](#footnote-19).

David Green recalls Professor Brown bringing a welcome sense of professionalism and integrity to Council proceedings, and that her report provided external approval to the discussions underway between the University of Strathclyde and UHI. Council received and agreed her report in March 2002; among the 13 recommendations, perhaps the most important was #5:

*UHIMI is recommended that:*

*The external partner be Strathclyde University with a major role in the collaborative development and implementation of the mixed-mode generic strand of the teacher education programme (the involvement of Aberdeen University on a collaborative basis at a later date might be possible).*

In November 2001 the new Dean of Education at the University of Strathclyde, Iain Smith, made contact with David Green, Principal at LCC, after which the pace of development began to quicken.

In the summer of 2002 two teachers, originally from Skye and both native Gaelic speakers, were seconded from their teaching positions in Edinburgh and Skye to the University of Strathclyde. They both relished the opportunity to work on what they thought would be the preparation of new Gaelic education materials. Instead they were asked to carry out a Gaelic translation of the existing (2002) University of Strathclyde Professional Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course materials. They thought then, and continue to maintain, that this was a lost opportunity to write a new course specifically targeted to Gaelic medium education.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Seonag MacKinnon was the Senior Primary Adviser with the Comhairle’s Education Department at this time and became closely involved in the practical details of putting together the collaboration between the University of Strathclyde, Lews Castle College UHI and Comhairle nan Eilean. She was joined by Graham White, Head of Post Graduate Studies at the University of Strathclyde Faculty of Education, Mona Wilson, lecturer in Gaelic Initial Teacher Education at Strathclyde, DK MacLeod and Annie Macsween from Lews Castle College UHI. Seonag MacKinnon’s recollection is that progress was not as rapid as she had hoped. Some of the reasons for this may be due to administrative difficulties caused by Strathclyde’s existing PGCE imminent re-accreditation by the GTC in April 2003.

In Scotland each university programme of teacher education is formally accredited by the GTC, a process which involves a thorough external examination of the programme’s content and quality. Reviews, or re-accreditations are usually carried out every four years and the Strathclyde PGCE was due.

The GTC re-accreditation event took place at the Jordanhill Campus of the University of Strathclyde on Wednesday April 30, 2003. Three different pathways were approved; English, Gaelic and part-time. The arrival of Lynda Keith as the Programme Director at this juncture was to prove significant. Her considerable organisational skills and her unshakable commitment to delivering teacher education in the Highlands and Islands was to be a key influence over the next six years. She also quickly developed a reputation amongst her primary teacher colleagues in Stornoway for always looking immaculate, no matter what the circumstances.

The 36 week PGDE Primary course was designed to be equally split, between 18 weeks spent studying four core modules and 18 weeks on school practice, divided into four blocks. The final practice was to be spent in one school for 6 weeks where it was expected students would be responsible for all lessons. Teaching on the four core modules would be delivered by Strathclyde staff using a combination of video-conference delivery to students in Stornoway and Inverness and face-to-face visits[[21]](#footnote-21). The 18 weeks of school practice were to be organised by UHI staff working in conjunction with local authority senior staff tutors. When Strathclyde tutors were delivering tutorials in Stornoway, the intention was that the class would be video conferenced to students in Inverness, though at the time of approval by the GTC this had yet to be discussed and agreed with the Highland Council.

There were to be two important occasions when students from the Highlands and Islands were to visit Jordanhill and join with students from the rest of the Strathclyde PGDE Primary course: three days induction at the commencement of the course in August and three days at the conclusion of the course in the following June. This was to be financed by the UHI colleges

A further component of the course was that every student would be provided with a lap-top computer by Strathclyde University. This was financed by the Scottish Executive following an application by the University, but seen as crucial to active student involvement by Linda Keith and colleagues. For the “remote” students in Stornoway and Inverness it was to prove very effective.

The programme was duly approved for delivery to the Highlands and Islands, beginning in August 2003. One important change was the move from a Professional Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) to a Professional Graduate Diploma of Education (PGDE).

Another development from discussions immediately following the GTC’s approval event was a franchising arrangement between UHI and the University of Strathclyde allowing UHI to deliver the Strathclyde MSc Chartered Teacher. This began in August 2003 and continued for nine years until 2012. During this period 77 teachers gained a Postgraduate Certificate and 19 gained an MSc Chartered Teacher. It was to prove an important influence on UHI’s ability to provide CPD opportunities for existing teachers and an important feature of the growing confidence and experience within the UHI team to work with the school-based teaching profession.

During 2003-04 two students from the Western Isles enrolled on the University of Strathclyde PGCE programme. They received the taught elements of the course through physical attendance at Jordanhill and the 18 weeks of teaching practice in Western Isles primary schools. This small start to the programme allowed for the detailed planning required when more students were to be recruited for the 2004-05 session.

Three Western Isles experienced primary teachers were appointed as University of Strathclyde Associate Tutors to support students while on their 18 weeks teaching practice. Seonag MacKinnon [[22]](#footnote-22) was joined by Katie Ann MacLeod, Depute Head at Sgoil na Loch and Margaret Ann Murray, Depute Head at Stornoway Primary School.

Delivery of the new programme to the Western Isles, while welcome, was not on its own going to address the serious shortage of Gaelic medium primary teachers; the net had to be thrown more widely. As the newly accredited programme got under way, serious negotiations began between the Principal and Depute of UHI, Robert Cormack and James Fraser, with Bruce Robertson, Director of Education for the Highland Council. Highland had long experienced problems in recruiting Gaelic- medium primary teachers and the Strathclyde programme was an important new solution to an old problem. However, the educational politics were complex. Bruce Robertson and the Highland Education Department had long and well established relations with the University of Aberdeen that he was reluctant to jeopardise. He was also not a big fan of Inverness College, which under the newly approved accreditation of the Strathclyde programme, would become a partner alongside Lews Castle College. For many in Scottish Teacher Education, UHI was an untested newcomer that had yet to demonstrate it could provide high-quality academic programme. UHI and Strathclyde also needed to quickly market the new course to teachers and Highland Council officials if it were to succeed in recruiting students for the 2004-05 session; timing was important if these discussions were to be successful.

One of the recurring themes in this story has been the contribution of key individuals occupying important positions who appear at critical moments. Ann C MacKay was the Head of the School of Arts, Heritage and Culture at Inverness College. Ann had previously been a secondary teacher of English and understood the importance of Inverness College becoming involved in Gaelic teacher education. A Gaelic lecturer at the college had recently departed and not been replaced and Ann saw an opportunity to re-establish the college’s Gaelic presence. Ann was to be the Inverness College co-ordinator of the PGDE programme for a number of years

A number of meetings took place in Inverness involving (though not all at the same time) Robert Cormack, James Fraser, Iain Smith, Lynda Keith and Bruce Robertson. These meetings became easier when it became known in March 2004that UHI had secured a development grant from Bòrd na Gàidhlig[[23]](#footnote-23) of £37,000 to aid the delivery of the programme to the Highlands and Islands. The part played by the Director of Bòrd na Gàidhlig, John Angus MacKay[[24]](#footnote-24), in approving this award was important. It was at this point that the doubts raised by the Highland Council that might prevent their collaboration and participation began to fade.

A Learning and Teaching Scotland conference for 250 primary teachers in the north of Scotland was held in Nairn on Thursday March 18, 2004. Bruce Robertson’s Depute, Donnie MacDonald, accompanied by Lynda Keith from Strathclyde and Ian Minty from UHI unofficially launched the new programme. Lynda Keith is a charismatic figure and a natural performer. She began her address to conference delegates by reminding them that not only did she know many of them in the room but that she had also taught them as student teachers. Her confident performance and enthusiasm did much to swing the support of Highland Gaelic teachers behind the Strathclyde initiative.

In order to recruit students for the 2004-05 session good publicity was required. The Highland Council agreed an official launch to take place on April 23, 2004 in the Council Chamber in Inverness. Nearly 50 people attended, including the MSP Alasdair Morrison, whose intervention back in November 2000 had been one of the principal factors leading to this event. Speakers at the launch included Professor Cormack from UHI, Bruce Robertson from the Highland Council and Lynda Keith from the University of Strathclyde.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes a protracted dialogue was taking place in UHI over the participation and involvement of Sabhal Mor Ostaig and whether they would join with the other two UHI partners, Lews Castle College and Inverness College. Sabhal Mor Ostaig’s (SMO) relationship within UHI could be characterised by being in UHI, but not always of UHI. It is first and foremost a Gaelic college and markets itself as Scotland’s Gaelic College; its partnership in UHI has often appeared to others, both within and outwith UHI, as characterised by an allegiance to the language first, before anything else. Around this time some senior staff within SMO had also begun to float the idea of a pan-Celtic university, embracing organisations committed to the support of Gaelic, Welsh and Irish languages.

Early exchanges between the UHI Executive Office and the Principal of SMO, Norman Gillies, were at first encouraging. But SMO were concerned that while the Strathclyde initiative centred on producing primary teachers able to teach in Gaelic, the course materials and language of delivery were not exclusively in Gaelic. SMO’s modus operandi is that all courses should being delivered through the medium of Gaelic, reinforced with materials written in Gaelic. So they delayed final judgement until they were able to scrutinise the programme materials.

Lynda Keith travelled to Skye to meet SMO senior management in the summer of 2004 and explain what was now being referred to as the UHI pathway of the University of Strathclyde PGDE (Primary-Gaelic) course. At the end of the discussions one of the SMO senior staff remarked that because elements of the course would be taught through the medium of English it was insufficiently Gaelic; it was, to use his phrase, “Gaelic-lite”. Therefore, SMO, reluctantly, declined to become involved. However, it gradually emerged that SMO had been cultivating their own relationship with the University of Aberdeen Department of Education to deliver what became known as the “2+2”, ie, students completing the first two years of their Gaelic degree at SMO and then moving on to the 3rd and 4th years of the Aberdeen BEd degree. Although to begin with it focussed on preparing secondary school teachers of Gaelic, it was subsequently expanded to include primary teachers. At the time of the launch of the Strathclyde initiative with UHI in 2004 these discussions were in their infancy, which probably explains why they were not made public until much later.

*“My understanding is that UHI would not at this time be involved in the validation of this course because of the OUVS agreement[[25]](#footnote-25) and that this would be a case of Aberdeen University recognising UHI modules from the Gaelic and Related Studies Scheme. In terms of Gaelic-medium teacher education for the secondary sector this is an extremely important initiative and with Aberdeen as one of the supporting institutions of UHI[[26]](#footnote-26) it would be good to move on this collaborative venture. I believe an initiative like this would gain the support of the GTC and SEED.” [[27]](#footnote-27)*

**2004-05**

Six women students were recruited to the UHI pathway of the Strathclyde PGDE Primary course in August 2004; three in Stornoway and three in Inverness; all were native speakers of Gaelic. Interviews were conducted in Stornoway and Inverness by a joint panel consisting of Strathclyde, UHI and local authority representatives; interviews were conducted in Gaelic. Flora Thomson from Barra came to live in Stornoway for the 18 weeks taught component of the course; her 18 weeks of practice (in three schools) was done on the islands of Eriskey and Barra.

Mairi MacLeod, from Lewis, one of the “Lewis 3”, had been working for STV in Glasgow but was told by her UHI Gaelic lecturer in Stornoway, Annie Macsween, that the course would be available in Stonoway from August 2004. When interviewed in 2016 Mairi recalled her Gaelic lecturer in Strathclyde, Mona Wilson as being a big source of encouragement. Mairi also spoke of how supportive her teacher colleagues were during school practice and the value of similarly supportive colleagues during her subsequent probationary year. Mairi went on to teach at Sir E Scott School in the Isle of Harris for 3 years, before moving to Laxdale School in Stornoway. She currently works part-time two days a week as a Gaelic-medium teacher in Stornoway Primary. Looking back, Mairi reflected on how the amount of Gaelic-medium resources for primary teachers has improved since she started teaching in 2005. Much of her time then was spent in translation of materials from English into Gaelic; now the situation now has been transformed by agencies such as Storlan[[28]](#footnote-28), and material available via the internet.

Bruce Robertson, Director of Highland Council Education Department agreed to employ two recently retired Gaelic primary teachers, Gina MacLean and Doda Dennis, to supervise the Inverness students’ school practice. All six students successfully completed the course and all went on to be Gaelic-medium primary teachers in the Highlands and Islands. One has since retired but the remaining five teachers still work as Gaelic-medium primary teachers.

**2005-06**

The economics of delivering the Strathclyde programme to the Highlands and Islands were always going to be challenging. In 2005-06 the Scottish Funding Council provided about £6000 per student to universities to deliver PGDE courses. How this was to be used came to be an important topic of conversation between Strathclyde and UHI.

When the news of student enrolments in Stornoway and Inverness became known, the local authority in Argyll and Bute contacted the University of Strathclyde to request that the feasibility of students from Islay be examined. At this point another key individual joined the cast. Rosemary Ward, originally from Garrynamonie in South Uist, was the Gaelic Education Adviser for Argyll and Bute Council and had long shared similar frustrations to her counterparts in the Western Isles on how to overcome the difficulties of geographical isolation for prospective teacher students. Rosemary was in touch with a group of five women on Islay who all met the criteria for acceptance on to the Strathclyde PGDE Primary course but were unable to commit to a year away in Glasgow. The women were interviewed and successfully gained places on the Strathclyde course. A former Head teacher at Rothesay Primary School, Roddy McDowall was recruited as an Associate Tutor,

Making use of the developing expertise UHI had in video conferencing, Lynda Keith was able to combine the Islay students into existing arrangements for students in Stornoway and Inverness. Four of them followed an English pathway and one was Gaelic-medium. The four blocks of school practice were completed in Islay. In Stornoway five Gaelic-speaking students were accepted on to the programme for that session. There were no suitable recruits accepted in Inverness that year. One of the Stornoway successful graduates later provoked animated discussion at the GTC in Edinburgh when it transpired that the teacher refused to accept a Gaelic-medium teaching position, insisting instead on English medium.

During this session, and following discussions between UHI Executive Office and the Dean’s Office in Strathclyde, it was agreed that the SFC’s funds for the PGDE programme would be distributed 60/40; ie. 40% of the SFC grant to Strathclyde for UHI students would be passed by the university to UHI to meet their costs of participating. This was a generous decision on the part of the university, and Iain Smith concedes that it was more favourable to UHI than it was to the University of Strathclyde. Writing recently Iain Smith said:

*I went for the 60/40 formula because I was consciously, if slightly surreptitiously, subsidising the UHI operation out of our (then) very large primary PCDE numbers. (Just as we did with various pt PGDE primary enterprises in Lanarkshire and in Dumfries and Galloway.) I had explained to our then Vice Chancellor why I wanted to do that - ie to show Strathclyde had an appetite for an outreach capability.*

UHI agreed that all of the money coming from Strathclyde would go direct to the participating UHI colleges on a per capita basis*.*

**2006-08**

As part of the process of building this new university many staff employed by the constituent FE College partners were heavily involved in the development of a rapidly expanding Higher Education curriculum. This was a period when new degrees were being devised, new modules written and collaboration across UHI’s academic partners offered staff exciting and new opportunities. The Executive Office in Inverness secured funding from the European Union Social Fund (ESF) to support Lifelong Learning[[29]](#footnote-29). This provided finance to support the development of 20 SCQF credit modules as part of the partnership with Strathclyde. The Highlands and Islands had EU special area status and were therefore able to apply for EU support not available to the Central Belt universities. One of the programme’s longer term objectives was sustainable employment and enhancing skills. Providing primary teachers to work in the Highlands and Islands clearly ticked this particular box. Over the three phases of ESF funding UHI received £680,000 for module development, and the PGDE (P) partnership between Strathclyde and UHI was one of the beneficiaries.

In this periods the PGDE course momentum grew. Across the three sites of Stornoway, Inverness and Argyll and Bute 26 students were recruited in each year. In 2006-07 there were 16 English pathway students and 10 Gaelic-medium students (eight in Stornoway and two in Inverness) and 2007-08 had 23 English pathway, but just three Gaelic-medium students (one in Stornoway and two in Inverness); there were no Gaelic-medium students recruited from Argyll and Bute. What was becoming increasingly obvious was:

* attracting suitably qualified students with fluent Gaelic was becoming more difficult;
* there were increasingly more students wishing to pursue the English pathway.

Maintaining the partnership as being only for Gaelic-medium teacher education was always going to be problematic. The flow of suitable Gaelic students was never going to be consistent and would fluctuate from year-to-year (as was to be shown). Despite the need for Gaelic medium students remaining persistently high, the greater demand for ITE in the Highlands and Islands emanated from monoglot English speakers. This created a tension for the partnership who were aware that to refuse access to English speaking students would be politically sensitive. Lynda Keith and Strathclyde‘s Faculty of Education were also anxious to prove the success and viability of their partnership in the Highlands and Islands; allowing access to also monoglot English speakers became an inevitability.

In 2007 Lynda Keith and Ian Minty were invited by Orkney College UHI to discuss with officials from Orkney Islands Council the possibility of extending the programme to Orkney. Although Orkney College was enthusiastic about the link with Strathclyde, this enthusiasm, so it transpired, was not matched (at that time) by Orkney Islands Council. Orkney and Shetland had long established links with the University of Aberdeen for ITE and were reluctant to jeopardise this by pursuing the UHI-Strathclyde partnership.

In the first five years of the programme all the 70 recruited students had been women who possessed a first degree; most of these were over the age of 25 and had families and or possessed other work experience. They had harboured the wish to become primary teachers but were either unable to unwilling to commit to a PGDE programme that entailed spending a year away from their home. While the collaboration between the University of Strathclyde and UHI demonstrated the importance and value of spreading an ITE presence into the Highlands and Islands, it was obvious that sustaining the initial rush of Gaelic-medium students would prove challenging. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Although Gaelic-medium primary education had certainly gained in popularity, there had been no similar development of secondary Gaelic-medium, apart from in Glasgow. This meant that pupils who had experienced seven years of primary school in Gaelic could not continue their secondary schooling in Gaelic(with the exception of Glasgow) and were therefore still not finishing their schooling fluent in the language of their birth. When the Chairperson of Comunn na Parant, Agnes Rennie, asked the Rector of the Nicolson Institute in Stornoway, Derek Curran, about why her children were not being taught in Gaelic, he replied that if she wanted secondary Gaelic-medium education she should move to Glasgow[[30]](#footnote-30).

Another possible reason is that those women aged 25 and over, who were fluent Gaelic speakers, already in possession of a first degree and who had wanted to become primary teachers, had already embarked on a PGDE Primary programme. In other words, UHI had already identified *most of the low-hanging fruit*. It would get progressively harder from here on.

**2008-09**

In 2002 Moray College UHI had expressed interest in becoming part of the arrangement with the University of Strathclyde. During 2007-08 the Principal of Moray College UHI in Elgin, Mike Devenney, indicated that students who had completed the UHI BA in Child and Youth Studies were keen to progress on to a PGDE Primary course; was it now possible for the collaboration with the University of Strathclyde to be extended to include another UHI partner college?

The BA in Child and Youth Studies was (and remains) one of UHI’s most popular degree programmes. It had at any one time around 200 students and offered an Honours year[[31]](#footnote-31); it was also delivered across most of the FE colleges that were academic partners in UHI.

Students at Moray College interested in ITE had tended to look east to the University of Aberdeen as being geographically nearer than a move to the Central Belt. But Elgin is still some 60miles from Aberdeen, an expensive and long daily round trip for any student with a family who could not relocate to the city for a year. UHI’s partnership with Strathclyde offered the prospect of local study to Moray College students. The Moray Council were also keen to support the Strathclyde link; although there was little demand for Gaelic-medium education in Moray, there had long been problems in attracting teachers more generally to this north-east corner of Scotland and the UHI link with Strathclyde offered a potential home-grown solution to the problem.

A Moray College lecturer, Lindsay Nicol, became the college-based coordinator of the programme. Moray Council agreed that the Head teacher of St Peter’s Primary School in Buckie, Amanda Feeley, would be an associate tutor and nine English pathway students were recruited for the 2008-09 session. They joined 22 students from Stornoway and Inverness, of who just three followed the Gaelic pathway.

As the number of students on the programme had grown from just two to 31 in six years, so had the experience and expertise within UHI and the three participating college partners; Lews Castle, Inverness and now Moray. Lecturing staff had learned much from their Strathclyde colleagues and Lynda Keith’s leadership had demonstrated what could be achieved with a commitment and a high level of organisational skills. In addition the UHI college staff, although geographically dispersed, had been able to grow as a team through a shared vision and extensive use of UHI’s technological advances, particularly in the use of video-conferencing and a virtual learning environment (VLE).

Up to this point in the story, all the UHI and Strathclyde PGDE graduates had been able to gain teaching appointments. This was not the case across Scotland; many graduates began to experience difficulties in gaining a teaching appointment as the supply of newly qualified teachers exceeded the number of jobs available. This created political tensions for the Scottish Government, now an SNP administration. The response of the Cabinet Secretary for Education, Fiona Hyslop, MSP, was to reduce the number of students entering ITE in Scotland’s universities. This, inevitably, had a knock-on effect on the numbers agreed by Strathclyde for UHI, as well as reducing the PGDE income from the Scottish Funding Council to Strathclyde.

The University of Strathclyde was also undergoing significant change. At the end of his second term as Dean of the Faculty of Education, Iain Smith retired. He was replaced by Professor Jill Bourne, from the University of Southampton. Professor Bourne had not previously worked in Scotland and had had no experience of Gaelic-medium education. She was, however, a keen exponent of research-led teaching, something that became a much-debated topic amongst Strathclyde teacher education practitioners at the time. Lynda Keith argued that leading a full-time programme of ITE of several hundred full-time students left no time for research without jeopardising the level of organisation needed to run the course. This was not a meeting of minds.

The Jordanhill Campus of the University of Strathclyde was also destined to close the following year, having been a focus of teacher education in Glasgow and the west of Scotland since 1921. At the end of the 2008-09 session Lynda Keith resigned to begin work as an independent education consultant. She was replaced by Linda Brownlow who now had responsibility for both the four year BEd degree as well as the PGDE Primary and Secondary.

**2009-12**

These were the final three years of the partnership with the University of Strathclyde. As Strathclyde’s ITE student numbers dropped following the Scottish Government’s decision to reduce entry on to ITE programmes, so did Strathclyde’s allocation of places to UHI. From the high point of 31 in 2008-09 numbers fell in the three years between 2009-12 to 21, ten and nine of whom just three pursued the Gaelic-medium pathway. Professor Bourne was also becoming increasingly concerned about the costs to Strathclyde University of operating the UHI partnership and in 2010 altered the funding formula from a 60/40 split to 70/30. This was also a reflection of the changed environment in ITE as overall numbers declined, following the decision of the Scottish Government to reduce recruitment. There was now less money coming into the University of Strathclyde for teacher education

At the start of the 2011-12 session UHI was informed this would be the last year of the partnership with Strathclyde. This was obviously a blow to UHI, but not a great surprise; the writing had been on the wall for a while. And in a curious way it worked to UHI’s advantage.

In 2010 the retired Depute Head of Dingwall Primary School, Mary Sinclair, joined the staff of Inverness College to support to the PGDE. Mary was originally from North Uist and a fluent Gaelic speaker; before her retirement she led Dingwall Primary’s Gaelic-medium unit. Mary brought some much-needed professional experience in Gaelic-medium teaching and established herself as an essential member of the UHI teacher education team.

Other changes taking place were to be of greater significance. In November 2009 the Scottish Government invited Graham Donaldson to conduct “*a fundamental review of teacher education in Scotland”.[[32]](#footnote-32)* Graham Donaldson had a background in Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Education (HMI) and rose to become head of the Scottish Inspectorate (HMIE) from 2002 – 2010. The Government’s commission, was in part the result of concern over teacher unemployment[[33]](#footnote-33), but more importantly the need to review teacher education in the light of a rapidly changing educational environment.

*The immediate context in Scotland was, and remains, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE).The opportunity offered – and the challenge posed – by CfE is that curriculum development, and transformational change at school and system level, will be driven by the professional capacity of teachers rather than through the central development of guidance and resources and external accountability.[[34]](#footnote-34)*

As part of his consultations Graham Donaldson and his team visited UHI’s Executive Office in August 2010 to meet Neil Simco and Ian Minty. They explained how UHI had built on its partnership with local authorities to strengthen the local delivery of the Strathclyde PGDE, in particular the use of experienced teachers in student selection and supervision of school practice. The value of a providing an opportunity in the Highlands and Islands for teacher education was also discussed. Recalling the meeting some time later, it seemed that UHI was pushing at an open door, as was subsequently shown when Graham Donaldson’s report was published. Although he did not specifically refer to a Highlands and Islands dimension, he did recommend:

*“New and strengthened models of partnership among universities, local authorities, schools and individual teachers need to be developed. These partnerships should be based on jointly agreed principles and involve shared responsibility for key areas of teacher education.”[[35]](#footnote-35)*

While Graham Donaldson and his team were collecting evidence for his review, UHI were reviewing life after the partnership with Strathclyde. The idea that UHI should apply to become a provider of teacher education, independent of any other university provider, had been discussed informally for some time. The decision of the University of Strathclyde to conclude the partnership served to concentrate minds within UHI. The approval to begin planning an application was agreed by UHI’s Academic Council at their meeting on 29 September, 2011.

At the time UHI was unclear as to the precise methodology by which a Scottish university gained TEI status. Advice was taken from the GTC in Edinburgh, the Scottish Government Learning Directorate and the Scottish Funding Council. There was a delicate balancing act to be performed as the Government provided advice to SFC about proposed student numbers each TEI could admit, but it was the GTC who approved a course of ITE. For UHI it became a delicate operation of trying to get all these pieces of the jigsaw into position at the right time, in particular relying on the advice from the Government to SFC that UHI would be allocated funded places in the 2013-14 funding round.

While these discussions continued, in 2011 UHI achieved its most important milestone to date. Following a recommendation from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, the UK Privy Council granted UHI university status. This brought to an end, some would argue, a campaign that had its origins nearly 100 years ago, to create a university of the Highlands and Islands. Others will write the history of UHI in detail; for this story it strengthened UHI’s movement toward TEI status.

**Teacher Education Institute status**

A central theme of UHI’s application, when work got underway in the autumn of 2011, was that a small team of lecturers spread across four academic partners (Lews Castle, Inverness, Orkney[[36]](#footnote-36) and Moray) had been working together, not just on delivery of the Strathclyde PGDE, but also the franchise arrangement with Strathclyde to deliver the MSc Chartered Teacher award, and, since 1999, UHI’s own MA in Professional Development. There was already in situ a team of lecturers with experience in delivering modules successfully at Masters (SCQF Level 11). The staff involved had built up a degree of trust in one another, while at the same time becoming more technically adept at delivering programmes using the “Blackboard” virtual learning environment and, where appropriate, video conferencing. The same team had also developed good working relationships with their respective local authority Education Departments; the use (and appreciation of) experienced teachers as Associate Tutors in the supervision of school practice, having been a feature of the PGDE programme since 2004-05, worked to UHI’s advantage.

Dr Anne Hughes, retired Deputy Principal of the University of Strathclyde was invited as external adviser to UHI’s team and helped shape the structure and content of the new programme. Part of the internal debate was how to accommodate the shift to teaching as a Masters qualified profession. The universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow had recently changed their PGDE programmes to deliver the taught component at Masters level (SCQF level 11), and the change had similarly been signalled in Graham Donaldson’s report:

*In line with emerging developments across Scottish universities, the traditional BEd degree should be phased out and replaced with degrees which combine in-depth academic study in areas beyond education with professional studies and development…..”[[37]](#footnote-37)*

In December 2012, the Scottish Government published its advice to Mark Batho, Chief Executive of the Scottish Funding Council on ITE student intake for the coming session 2013-14. Under “Requirements for Gaelic Medium, Rachel Sunderland, Head of the Scottish Government’s Learning Directorate wrote:

*The University of the Highlands and Island (UHI) have worked have worked in partnership with Strathclyde University in the past to provide PGDE Primary in both Gaelic and English medium. This partnership arrangement is now no longer in place and UHI have expressed an interest in becoming an ITE provider of PGDE in both Gaelic and English medium in their own right. Along with providing another avenue to access Gaelic medium provision a course of this nature will also widen access to teacher education for those in more rural areas. It is, therefore, recommended that the Council allocates 20 additional places in PGDE Primary to such a course.[[38]](#footnote-38)*

This advice depended of course on UHI gaining the approval of the GTC over the content and quality of the programme offered. The UHI team had been working on the documentation required by the GTC for some time; they came forward for an internal validation[[39]](#footnote-39) in February 2013 with all taught (20 credit) modules delivered at Masters level. The panel, including an external PGDE programme leader from Edinburgh University Moray House, were of the view that UHI should develop its competency to deliver the programme at level 10 (Honours) before moving to level 11. Although the team were disappointed, it proved to be sound advice.

The GTC accreditation panel met the UHI team in Inverness in May 2013. The panel consisted of three Council members of the GTC and two external members, one a Dean of Education at another Scottish university, and the other Senior Education Officer from a large Scottish local authority. The panel commended UHI for the strength of the programme team over four partner institutions “within a potentially complex structure and the positive approach to the use of information and communications technology in delivering learning and teaching”.[[40]](#footnote-40) The panel agreed two conditions:

1. By 31 March 2014 the programme team must provide to the General Teaching Council for Scotland a report on the progress made on the development of its research capacity and a plan of how it will feed into teaching at SCQF level 11 in due course;
2. By 31 July 2014 the programme team must provide to GTC Scotland an evaluation of the first year of the running of the programme.

UHI had advertised the programme to prospective students in March 2013, with the important proviso that acceptance on the course was subject to gaining GTC approval. 64 people applied for the 20 places available, of whom the vast majority were from the geographical area covered by the four participating UHI colleges. Following the GTC’s decision nine students were offered a place in Inverness, five in Elgin, two in Orkney and four in Stornoway, of whom only one was Gaelic-medium. The Gaelic take-up was disappointing, although one of Gaelic rejected candidates was offered a place on the Gaelic-medium course at the University of Strathclyde, indicating that perhaps UHI had opted for a more cautious approach to interviews. Sifting of applicants was carried out as a joint exercise by the team; interviews were organised locally and all involved representatives of the relevant local authority education department[[41]](#footnote-41)

At the end of the first year 18 out of the 20 students successfully met the criteria to proceed to their induction year as newly qualified primary teachers. Two students repeated their final teaching practice and were deemed successful at their second attempt in the autumn of 2014. The one Gaelic-medium teacher regrettably decided that teaching was not for her after completing one term of her induction year. The other 19 completed their induction year, although some had to content themselves with temporary contracts until a permanent position became available.

**Conclusion**

In looking back over these events it is possible to draw attention to some important themes.

1 The demand for Gaelic-medium teachers continues to outstrip their supply, despite the best efforts of the Scottish Government and TEIs. The provision of Gaelic-medium ITE courses alongside English provision has proved to be insufficient to fill the vacancies that exist in Highland, the Western Isles, Argyll and Bute and in those other mainland local authorities that have created Gaelic schools[[42]](#footnote-42) and Gaelic-medium units within existing schools.

2 Back in 1999 Brian Wilson, M.P., encouraged the GTC for Scotland and (then) Scottish Office to identify those registered teachers who were Gaelic speakers and who might retrain as Gaelic-medium teachers, teaching their specialist subject in Gaelic. Gaelic Immersion for Teachers (GIfT) developed by the University of Strathclyde in conjunction with Glasgow and Edinburgh City Councils and supported financially by Bòrd na Gàidhlig, is now in its second year of operation. Twelve teachers successfully completed the first cohort, one of whom returned home as a Gaelic-medium primary teacher to the Western Isles. Eight teachers are presently enrolled on the scheme.

3 The partnership arrangements with participating local authorities, and especially the use of senior and experienced primary teachers as Associate Tutors proved to be highly successful. Not only were they able to play an influential role in the selection process but their direct supervision of the school practice component was a vital part of the programme’s success.

4 Professor Sally Brown’s 2002 report to UHI helped create a heightened awareness within the Executive Office of the importance of Gaelic teacher education. It coincided with the appointment of a new Dean of the Faculty of Education at the University of Strathclyde who was keen to show how distributed forms of teacher education could work. Their decision to enter into a partnership with UHI proved to be an enlightened one. It allowed a considerable number of (mainly) women, *mature learners, ie over 25,* who had previously been unable to consider a career as primary teacher to fulfil their potential; and in doing so have a positive impact on teacher supply in the Highlands and Islands. That the age profile began to change as the partnership with Strathclyde neared its end, and in the first year (2013-14) of UHI as an independent TEI, was perhaps an indication of the growing impact of UHI as a university. In the nine years that the UHI and Strathclyde partnership existed 141 primary teachers successfully completed the course. Of these 38 were Gaelic-medium and 103 English.

5 When designing UHI’s first taught postgraduate Master’s degree (MA in Professional Development) an external academic adviser from the University of Aberdeen commented that the degree represented an important building block for the then embryonic university. The lecturing team responsible for this degree worked in four UHI partner colleges, separated geographically by hundreds of miles, plus stretches of the North Atlantic Ocean. It was also largely the same team of staff that worked on the MSc Chartered Teacher with colleagues from Strathclyde, and who formed the core of the PGDE Primary partnership with Strathclyde. By the time of the GTC accreditation of UHI’s PGDE Primary in May 2013 this team of lecturers had been working successfully together for 16 years.

6 UHI benefitted from coming forward with its plans to become a TEI just at the time that Graham Donaldson produced his report for the Scottish Government. This proved to be good timing, if serendipitous.

**Postscript**

In the four years since UHI became a TEI in 2013-14 it has enrolled 200 PGDE Primary students. Of these 9 (4.5%) have been Gaelic-medium; seven having successfully completed and two enrolled in the current session (2016-17).

The number of UHI academic partner colleges, and their respective local authorities, involved in delivery of the PGDE(P) award has risen to six, with the addition of Shetland College and Argyll College.

Gaelic teacher education has now ceased at the University of Aberdeen. The 2+2 BEd, started originally by Aberdeen with Sabhal Mor Ostaig in 2007, is now in the process of being validated for delivery by UHI in 2017-18

The University of Edinburgh (Moray House) began four and five year undergraduate degrees for Gaelic-medium education in 2014-15. The programme was designed as one response to ‘Teaching Scotland’s Future 2010’ where Donaldson recommended that teachers have a deep knowledge of their specialist subject. The four year degree is for entrants who have Higher Gàidhlig and the 5 year degree for learners who can demonstrate an aptitude for language but do not require to have Gaelic (i.e. another language at SQA level). Students on the 5 year route spend one year at Sabhal Mor Ostaig UHI to consolidate their Gaelic language skills.

**About the author**

I was the Education Subject Network Leader for UHI from 2003 until 2013 when I retired. Prior to that, from 1993, I worked as an education lecturer in Lews Castle College in Stornoway. I first came to work in the Isle of Lewis in 1983 as the Director of the Western Isles Community Education Project; this was a collaboration between Comhairle nan Eilean and the Bernard van Leer Foundation, an international educational foundation, based in The Hague. For eight years (2001-09) I was an appointed member of the General Teaching Council for Scotland and for three years (2010-13) represented UHI on the Scottish Teacher Education Council.

Ian Minty

Stornoway, Isle of Lewis

March 2017

1. Nisbet, J. Telling Anecdotes. Education in the North. No 12. 2004-05 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Acair is the Gaelic word for anchor; it has just celebrated its 40th anniversary. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The opening of the first secondary school in Benbecula in 1988, Sgoil Lionacleit, led to a reorganisation of primary education and the subsequent closure of nine primary schools in the Uists. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Provisional primary school pupil numbers for 2016-17 total 1886, of which 689 (36.5%) are being taught through the medium of Gaelic. Figures provided by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (the Western Isles Council). The Council have opened a number of Gaelic Medium Units in existing primary schools, but are yet to create their first dedicated Gaelic primary school. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The UK population census records that between the 1981 and 2011 the number of Gaelic speakers in Scotland fell from 87000 to 57000. Figures provided by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Only in the city of Glasgow is it possible to be taught through the medium of Gaelic from 5-18 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. # Initial Teacher Education Arrangements for Teaching in Gaelic-Medium Education:

   ###### Report to the GTC Accreditation & Review Committee. GTCS. 29.11.99.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A Limited Liability Company. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. This gained formal recognition from the Scottish Government in 2010 and was renamed West Highland College [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. BA Rural Development, validated by Aberdeen University. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Earlier in the day Dr Galbraith had announced the Scottish Executive had rejected the long-running planning application for a “super” quarry at Lingerbay in the Isle of Harris. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jordanhill College was by now part of the University of Strathclyde and housed the Faculty of Education under its then Dean, Douglas Weir. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Douglas Ansdell recalls that at that time the Scottish Executive also put some words into the annual letter of Guidance from the Scottish Executive to the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) saying that in support of GM teaching the SFC should be willing to explore new routes into GM teaching.  He also confirmed that encouragement has remained in the annual guidance letter since that time.  [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Bruce Robertson was an alumni of the University of Aberdeen and as Director of Education in the Highland Council had built a close relationship with the university’s Education Department. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. SHEFC Circular letter No HE/15/01 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. University of Strathclyde Faculty of Education letter, 1st May 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In 2002 other UHI partner colleges, notably North Highland College in Thurso and Moray College in Elgin expressed an interest to join with Lews Castle. Moray College joined the programme in 2008-09. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Letter dated 1st October 2001 from Matthew Maciver to Professor Cormack. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Brown, S. Teacher Education for Gaelic-Medium Teaching, Institute of Education, University of Stirling. March 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Interviewed in 2016 one of them believes that 2nd language acquisition and learning a minority language were priorities in 2002 and still are today. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Students in Stornoway and Inverness were later to extol the benefit of these visits, though they undoubtedly formed a major financial outlay for both UHI and Strathclyde. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Seonag MacKinnon was Director of Education for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar from 2009-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ## Bòrd na Gàidhlig’s remit is to promote and develop the Gaelic language, increase the numbers of Gaelic speakers and expand the range of opportunities for people to use the language.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. John Angus MacKay comes from the Isle of Lewis, and was Director of Bòrd na Gàidhlig during a critical period for UHI. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. From 1997 until 2004 undergraduate and postgraduate degrees obtained by UHI students were validated and awarded by the Open University. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Aberdeen was one of three sponsoring universities for UHI, the other two being Edinburgh and Strathclyde. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Norman Gillies, Principal of Sabhal Mor Ostaig in an email dated 07.02.2007 to Dr Sheila Lodge, then Faculty Dean in UHI. Forwarded by her to the author. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Storlan **was established in 1999** to produce, publicise and distribute **educational resources in Gaelic.** [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. ESF measure 3.3 Curriculum Expansion for Community Learning, 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Comunn na Parant is the national organisation for parents wishing to bring up their children to be Gaelic speakers. The author was present at the meeting where this conversation took place. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Scottish Credit Qualification Framework Level 10 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. The review, “Teaching Scotland’s Future: report of a review of teacher education in Scotland” was published in December 2010. It has become known, informally, as The Donaldson Report. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. This was acknowledged in Recommendation 6 of the report: “*The accuracy of workforce planning should be improved through universities and local authorities providing their projections on an annual basis.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Evaluation of the Impact of Teaching Scotland’s Future. Black C, Bowen L, Murray L and Zubairi S. Ipsos MORI Scotland, 2016 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Recommendation 15. Teaching Scotland’s Future. Scottish Government 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Orkney College asked to become part of the UHI application to the GTC, largely through the efforts of Vice Principal, Issy Grieve who had worked on the Strathclyde MSc Chartered Teacher and the UHI MA in Professional Development. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Recommendation 11. Teaching Scotland’s Future. Scottish Government 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Letter from Rachel Sunderland, Head of the Learning Directorate of the Scottish Government to Mark Batho, Chief Executive of the Scottish Funding Council, dated 21.12.2012. Paragraph 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Essentially an internal rehearsal where the university decided whether the team could proceed to a full approval event, carried out in this case by the GTC. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. GTC Report of Accreditation Panel, dated 24.06.13, [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. The Highland Council, Moray Council, Orkney Islands Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Glasgow Gaelic School, Glendale Primary School – Glasgow, Inverness Gaelic Primary School, Lochaber Gaelic Primary School, Bun-sgoil Taobh na Pairce, Edinburgh, and opening in August 2017 Portree Gaelic Primary School [↑](#footnote-ref-42)