

# Belonging and Place: A Case Study of Digital Practices at the University of the Highlands and Islands.

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## Abstract.

This case study synthesizes findings from a strengths-focused project on belonging, place, and digital practices, conducted across the federated network of partner colleges comprising the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) in Scotland. Completed by a Canadian researcher serving as a UHI visiting fellow, the project involved over thirty individual and group interviews with staff across nine partner colleges and campuses. UHI's distributed structure emerged from that data as a key foundation for community sustainability as well as individual opportunities for learning and flourishing. Overall, the findings demonstrate that belonging at UHI is fundamentally place-based and relational, and supported by participatory and connection-focused digital practices. The paper showcases a model of institutional digital and distance education governed not by scale but by a constellation of place-based and human-centered practices. The study centres how belonging can be fostered by an institution being grounded in the place and people it serves, even amidst this challenging global era in further/higher education.

**Keywords:** Belonging; Digital practices; Gaelic culture; Relationality; Tertiary education.

## 1. Introduction and significance.

This strengths-based case study of the intersections of belonging, place, and digital learning focuses on the digital, cultural, and institutional practices of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) in Scotland. Conducted by a Canadian Associate Professor of Online Pedagogy who served as Visiting Scholar at UHI in 2024-25, the study explores the ways that UHI intertwines digital practice, community sustainability, and cultural values. This paper parallels the more in-depth, public, and openly-licensed report on findings from the study, found [here](#). The report offers significant additional detail in its outline of key dimensions, challenges, and institutional strengths. The paper, on the hand, grounds the project in literature on belonging and digital practice, and overviews the study's findings for an audience not necessarily familiar with UHI, but engaged with issues of digital teaching and higher education practice.

This study of UHI practices offers an exemplar for a human-centered, digitally-enabled model of further and higher education in this second quarter of the 21st century, when automation and corporate control of education are rising across the tertiary education sector, internationally. In the Irish context wherein distributed, multi-campus Technological Universities have recently become part of the higher education landscape, the paper may have particular relevance in its treatment of a parallel Scottish institution serving the broad geographic and cultural region of the Highlands as an exemplar for connected digital practice.

UHI is an integrated tertiary institution with 48 campuses, learning centres, and research institutions distributed across the Highlands and Islands region of Scotland. Comprised of ten partner colleges and offering more than 300 courses of study both in local communities and via digital distance methods, UHI was formally incorporated as a higher education institution in 2001. Its distributed structure and its reliance on digital learning to ensure access to education in regional communities combine to make it an optimal site for investigating digital practices, while its mandate and responsibility to support the use of Gaelic, inside and outside of traditionally Gaelic communities, makes it a unique space for the research of culture and place's role in education. UHI includes Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO) on the Isle of Skye, the National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture.

This case study was designed to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of how concepts of belonging – in the participatory digital sense and in place-based and cultural senses – manifest and intersect in UHI's pedagogical practices and programs. The project approaches

belonging as a relational phenomenon: an individual and psychological human need (Maslow, 1943), but also a discursive concept of socio-spatial and structural inclusion at the social level (Antonsich, 2010), relative to hierarchies, power relations, and local norms. Yuval-Davis (2006) identifies three levels of belonging: social location within power structures, identification with and emotional attachment to collectives and groups, and the ethical and political structures through which people understand belonging. Habib and Ward (2020) further posit belonging as a form of labour that produces and reproduces the world, emphasizing it as a set of situated, negotiated practices that are always relational and socio-material. These structural and socio-material understandings are reflected in education-focused literature on belonging, which emphasize students' lived experiences of value, care, inclusion, and connection in school (Allen et al., 2018; Strayhorn, 2018). Ultimately, this project draws on individual, relational, cultural, structural and socio-material concepts of belonging to interpret how educational staff across the Highlands and Islands region frame educational and digital practices of belonging, in the context and spirit of what hooks (2009) calls a culture of place.

In showcasing UHI, the project aims to turn ideas of peripherality and centrality on their heads. UHI is a small institution situated outside global geographical and prestige centres, in an area often framed as remote. However – like belonging – that framing, too, is a product of power relations. This study approached UHI not as peripheral to international higher education, but as an exemplar for human-centered, relational, participatory digital and distance learning. The case study highlights UHI as a model for place-based education in other contexts, countries, and continents.

## 2. Methodology.

The research methodology for this project was a strengths-based case study. A case study aims to understand how *“behaviour and/or processes are influenced by, and influence context”* (Hartley, 2004). The behaviour and processes in this case were digital and belonging practices, with specific focus on how each of these shapes or is shaped by UHI's unique geographical, cultural, and educational characteristics and context.

The project's data collection was qualitative, comprised of more than thirty semi-structured interviews with over forty UHI staff total. Staff from across six of UHI's academic partner colleges were interviewed, at campuses and learning centres in Inverness, Perth, Elgin, Stornaway, Portree, Broadford, Sleat, and Fort William. A staff member from Dornach campus was

interviewed online, and the researcher also visited Oban. The researcher was an outsider to the UHI context, so invitations to participate were initiated through UHI's Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA), which hosted the Visiting Fellowship and scheduled the researcher's journey across sites.

A combination of purposive and convenience sampling was used to organize interviews: participants were all UHI staff engaged in some aspect of digital learning, but also needed to be available within the project travel schedule. The LTA coordinated communications and contacts with partner colleges, who then identified and invited participants. Most interviews were conducted individually, though four occurred in pairs and three in small focus groups, based on availability. Participants were asked to share their perspectives on key dimensions of belonging, digital practice, and local culture in relation to UHI and their own campus/college in 60-90 minute recorded sessions.

Participants held staff positions at UHI ranging from student support to direct teaching to leadership and administrative or technical support. The teaching staff who contributed worked with both further and higher education students, across a wide variety of courses. Approximately 2/3 of interviewees identified as female, the rest as male. The majority of the interviews were conducted in person, at a UHI partner college campus or learning centre, and were accompanied by opportunities for the researcher to experience the local campus and context in which belonging was being discussed. Due to unanticipated illness, four interviews were conducted entirely online.

According to Coghlan and Brydon-Miller (2014), "*(t)he central tenet of strengths-based theory and practice is...all stakeholders in a project or activity are participants in a process of enquiry searching for the best answers and solutions while developing new knowledge*" (p. 733). Strengths-based case study methodology can provide contextual understandings of complex systems that traditional problem-focused approaches might overlook, making it a solid choice for a project aimed at showcasing UHI's distributed digital and cultural belonging practices. The methodology enabled synthesis of staff's "*insider perspectives*" on organizational functioning, successes, and resilience factors with the researcher's outsider insights and reflections. The case study aimed to highlight how UHI's particular integrated and distributed structures and practices could serve as a model for grounding digital practices in belonging and place.

As a strengths-based case study, the project invited participants to contribute in the context of their professional roles, with supervisors or campus leaders identifying and scheduling

interviews on behalf of the researcher. The strengths focus was chosen and emphasized because data collection investigated people's perspectives about their own workplace: the researcher wanted to minimize any sense of risk that might potentially be felt by participants. The project received a Research Ethics exemption from the researcher's home institution, the University of Windsor in Canada, as the study collected "*information from authorized personnel to release information or data in the ordinary course of their employment.*" Each participant was informed of the study's strengths-based nature and purpose, and told that data would be both anonymously synthesized into a report for UHI itself as well as shared openly via project blog, scholarly papers, and presentations. All interviews but one – for which notes were taken due to internet issues – were recorded and transcribed by Teams.

Semi-structured interviews enabled UHI staff to articulate their experiences of the organization and its strengths on their own terms, revealing tacit knowledge, informal processes, and contributing factors. The questions posed in the interviews were developed from an in-depth annotated bibliography compiled by the researcher and a graduate assistant (Stewart & Le, 2026), focused on identifying key elements and tenets of belonging across place-based and digital learning contexts. Based in the tenets that emerged, the interviews inquired about participants' understandings and experiences of belonging, digital practice, place, and local culture, as well as about the intersections they perceived, and about UHI's strengths relative to each. The interviews were centered in strengths-focused appreciative inquiry techniques, emphasizing insights, valued contributions, and core factors rather than definitions or problems. Belonging was therefore not defined by the researcher, but rather left open for participants to interpret. The researcher did not steer away from conversations that turned to challenges at UHI, but those perspectives are reserved for the UHI-facing report from the project.

Thematic analysis of interview transcripts identified key patterns and commonalities, synthesizing findings across multiple interviews and across core questions. Multiple dimensions of core research queries, including key digital practices, sociotechnical intersections, and strengths and challenges of UHI in relation to belonging were all systematically identified where they emerged in the transcripts, and were hand-coded, categorized, and collated. A socio-material, socio-technical lens was used in coding, to try to identify intersections between social, technical, cultural, and institutional aspects of participant understandings. Eleven transcripts were also put into Claude AI Opus 4 for comparative theming. Claude usage was reserved for transcripts with more than one interviewee at once, wherein linear narrative was sometimes absent. Parts of the transcript were entered and the prompt was "*please distill 5-7 themes*

*emerging from this topic.*” Where resonant bullet point results from Claude brought forward small but significant perspectives and details that hand-coding had overlooked, the researcher revisited some of the original hand-coded themes to incorporate these elements. However, fewer than half of the thirty-plus transcripts were themed by AI: that layer of additional checking was reserved for particularly long or multi-vocal interviews. The thematic analysis process ultimately surfaced the generalized findings that follow, which were synthesized from commonalities across the transcripts and codes, with focus here on key dimensions of belonging, and key digital practices that were found to support belonging.

### **3. Findings and Discussion.**

#### **3.1 Key dimensions of belonging.**

##### **3.1.1 Place-based connection: Dùthchas.**

Across UHI's federated network, staff consistently articulated concepts of belonging as deeply connected to sense of place and community. The term “*Dùthchas*,” (Irish: “*dúchas*”), a Scottish Gaelic term for an ecological, kin-based, place-based worldview rooted in the interconnectedness of people, land, and culture (Meighan, 2022), appeared multiple times during interviews and conversations. Often framed as a concept of belonging, home, or birthright, Dùthchas centres on ideals of heritable trusteeship, responsibilities as well as rights, and the historical principle of land as a communal entity to which people belong(ed). While the researcher, a Canadian without deep familiarity with Gaelic, was unaware of the term at the time the project was designed, this relational and intertwined sense of belonging and place echoed throughout the data, even in sites where Gaelic itself is minimal.

The spirit of Dùthchas was visible across UHI, in the ways in which staff tended to prioritize local ties and regional connections. Staff's conceptions of belonging emphasized strong connections between geography, culture, and identity, positioning UHI as an enabler of community sustainability rather than a catalyst for outmigration. Instead of a pathway away from place – in the longstanding Highland tradition of youth leaving for universities in Edinburgh, Glasgow, or London – education at UHI was framed by practitioners as a means of strengthening local ties. There was pervasive emphasis on the institution's role in combating the historical trend of youth leaving the region for education and never returning. Staff framed their work not just as educators but as enablers of a form of belonging that actively resists this “*brain drain*.” Staff also

described ongoing balancing of academic rigour with respect for local ways of knowing, efforts to assess place-based learning outcomes, and occasional tensions between formal qualifications and local career paths. In almost all contexts, belonging was framed as opening up lives and livelihoods within local communities and the region more broadly.

### **3.1.2 Relational connections.**

The foundation of belonging at UHI appears to be relationships and support structures, with human connection consistently centered by staff as the critical factor in identifying and building belonging across all dimensions of the institution. This aligns with a significant body of educational literature on belonging, which consistently emphasizes the importance of relationality, connection, and supports and services to fostering belonging in learning contexts (Cohen, 2022; Taff & Clifton, 2022).

Educational practices across UHI incorporate and validate place-based knowledge systems that might be marginalized in traditional academic contexts. Rather than treating Highland landscapes simply as backdrops for outdoor activities, the Adventure Studies program increasingly incorporates Highland understandings of cultural history, ecological relationships, and local knowledge traditions. Similarly, programs at the Centre for History emphasize local archives and oral traditions alongside conventional academic sources. Environmental science programs incorporate crofters' observations and traditional ecological knowledge. Gaelic programs recognize and foster regional linguistic variations. The program-level identities fostered in individual partner colleges or courses were found not to preclude belonging to the broader institution, but to build affiliations and loyalties strengthened by day-to-day common purpose. Such place-based approaches challenge academic hierarchies and conventional prestige economies, and honour embedded local knowledge. They reflect fundamentally relational and locally-oriented concepts of belonging that highlight the specific region in which UHI operates.

The institution also scaffolds focused relationships designed to foster supports for students. UHI's Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) system, which structures connections between students and hired tutors, was repeatedly brought up as a key to building student belonging. The PAT systems provides both academic guidance and a level of connected, emotional support that many staff participants identified as crucial for student retention, success, and well-being.

Many staff members were adamant and direct about the belief that meaningful connection

emerges through deliberate such relationship-building practices rather than from institutional structures or technological systems alone. Across UHI campuses, educators described investing significant pedagogical effort into creating “*authentic human connections*” in both physical and digital teaching environments, and framed belonging as tied to actively-cultivated classroom rapport. One participant framed UHI’s programs, particularly online programs with low barriers to participation, as “*open threads that might draw people or weave people into the fabric of higher education.*” The institution was also narrated as responsible for weaving together formal and informal learning pathways that serve both individual students and the broader communities.

The metaphor of weaving was also used to conceptualize ties to higher and further education as well as to classmates in other communities across the Highlands and Islands. It was drawn on as a way of discussing the intentional work done on campuses to make belonging happen for students. It also emerged as a means to talk about how UHI reinforces belonging in regional communities through the creation of opportunity and capacity to stay “*in place.*”

Accessibility and inclusivity were tied to many narratives of belonging at UHI, as well as to the relational pedagogies and flexible delivery methods that enable students to balance work, family, and education. Staff emphasized diverse modes of engagement, recognition of different learning capacities and preferences, and accommodation of various life circumstances. As one staff member noted, “*belonging does not require uniform participation.*”

### **3.1.3 Grounded in living culture.**

UHI’s specific rootedness in place and culture also emerged as a critical dimension of belonging at UHI: the institution’s specific mandate of place and culture strengthens its overall identity and sense of mission. While many staff interviewed for the project were incomers, originating from outside the region, staff across the institution were explicit and intentional about working to support and maintain local culture and values while providing a strong contemporary educational foundation. There was repeated emphasis on pathways that build local capacity and leadership, amidst careful navigation of local hierarchies and complex power structures.

Both Highland identity, as a rural, regional construct with contemporary class-based divisions, and Gaelic cultural identity, with historical and linguistic roots, appeared to be represented in UHI staff’s construction of local culture. In the islands, particularly at Gaelic language college Sabhal Mòr Ostaig (SMO), but also elsewhere on Skye and on Lewis, an historical and distinctly

Gaelic sense of place was evident. At the same time, most participants emphasized that not all students are from the communities in which they learn, and that belonging in the contemporary global era has multiple axes, with geography and culture simply being prominent ones.

Cultural preservation requires sensitivity to hierarchies, traditions, and power dynamics. Sometimes, institutions preserve or value heritage differently from locals. “*Traditional Highland values*” were referred to in interviews from multiple campuses as sites of navigation, both for incomer and local staff. Teachers in particular described consciously working to support cultural norms and values while providing educational opportunities designed to sometimes create pathways outside those bounds. The fact that UHI enables students to stay and learn in their home communities means those same students must navigate traditional community expectations, especially regarding gender roles and status trajectories, alongside more progressive educational ideals.

At the same time, one participant noted that the very existence of a higher education space in their community helps sustain roles and relationships for students who might not “*belong*” by traditional norms, while another emphasized how the college provides safety for gender transitioning students who can express their identity on campus even if they must “*go back to the person that they were*” at home. A distinctive Highland cultural characteristic that emerged from the research data was what participants described as a “*live and let live*” attitude: a pragmatic tolerance that creates space for diversity within traditional communities. UHI campuses were described as “*surprisingly accepting of diversity despite the region being rural and relatively homogeneous demographically.*”

Again in keeping with literature on belonging and not-belonging (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2022), it also appeared to be broadly understood that not all students will want to belong in the same ways. One staff member, speaking about her own return to school later in life, noted that some mature learners do not seek additional community through education. It was also widely noted that other students – particularly those who may be isolated or have caregiving responsibilities – may find real value in it and actively seek peer connections. UHI’s flexible pathways for engagement in learning, which include further and higher education opportunities within given fields of study as well as significant modality choice, were spoken about as ways of honouring these variances in student needs for connection and community.

In Gaelic-medium programs at UHI, language education serves as a vehicle for cultural continuity and as an immersive site of complex cultural negotiations. Interviews at SMO

emphasized Gaelic as part of a mosaic of minority languages, framed within the dignity of all cultures, with SMO serving as a central node for Gaelic speakers globally. This approach to belonging values interconnection between native speakers and learners, but also means teaching practices must address tensions between formal language usages often emphasized in academic contexts and the contemporary, evolving nature of spoken Gaelic in communities. Participants spoke of making room both for heritage speakers who possess embodied knowledge and for learners who bring analytical or technical understandings, as well as traditions carried or signified within the language itself. Classes were referred to as spaces where language uses are negotiated, supporting both preservation and evolution. At the same time, the limits of trying to replicate the immersive experience of SMO online were acknowledged, with digital practices framed as complementary to the building of belonging that happens at the SMO campus in Sleat.

The treatment of Gaelic as living culture extends beyond language instruction to influence broader institutional approaches to learning, including incorporation of folklore and oral sources in academic research, poetry taught through traditional singing methods, and metrics preserved through oral transmission. Staff also describe creating spaces where different varieties of Gaelic can coexist, where learners from diverse backgrounds – including LGBTQ+ individuals seeking alternative cultural spaces – can find belonging, and where connections between Scots and Irish Gaelic traditions are maintained. This positions UHI not just as a protector of linguistic heritage but as an active participant in language evolution.

## **3.2 Digital practices for belonging and connection.**

### **3.2.1 Humanizing online spaces.**

UHI has decades of experience with distributed and digital learning: many interviewees noted that the institution was a leader in online and digitally-supported education long before the COVID-19 pandemic made such practices mainstream. Staff interviewed appeared fluent in digital pedagogies, and participatory methods of online education were spoken of as key to the institution's digital approach. UHI staff almost universally discussed digital practices as fundamentally pedagogical and relational rather than merely technical. Educational technology pioneers at UHI described fundamental shifts in early online pedagogy from broadcast models to interactive engagement, referring to "*facilitating rather than broadcasting.*" Teaching staff

described investing significant pedagogical effort into creating authentic connections across teaching environments and spoke of “*helping by experience*” in terms of scaffolding understandings of engaged teaching for new colleagues. Staff tended to frame technology as a means of enabling social and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) and connection across distances. There was also emphasis on maintaining authentic engagement within digital teaching contexts, requiring intentional cultivation of human elements within digital spaces. Open resources and frameworks were also identified as key means for teaching staff to support flexibility and accessibility across the distributed institution.

In language classes, “*humanizing*” online learning was presented as of particular importance, and a means of building comfort, comprehension, and belonging. Teaching staff highlighted a range of humanizing and connective digital practices: creating personal video notes for feedback, to help maintain instructor presence between synchronous sessions, opening classes with personal greetings to students, announcements that keep students connected to course rhythms and expectations, location-based check-ins that acknowledge students' embodied contexts and lives, taking time to establish rapport before diving into content. One participant called digital tools “*fertilizer*” for relationships, fostering but not replacing human connections.

The strategic use of breakout rooms was emphasized as an important humanizing practice across disciplines and content, with multiple instructors noting that they carefully design small online group interactions to foster peer relationships. Small groups were preferred for meaningful engagement, with deliberate mixing of different levels of expertise or background to enrich discussions. However, instructors also recognized student agency, with one noting they offer breakout opportunities while recognizing “*some students may not want to build those ties as much as others.*”

### **3.2.2 Flexible engagement models.**

In support of the institution's place-based mission, UHI offers both synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities with flexible scheduling that reflects Highland and island life patterns. Online classes and program schedules accommodate traditional work responsibilities and schedules in rural communities where students may be crofting, fishing, or engaged in seasonal tourism work.

Asynchronous learning was emphasized as particularly important for working students, but in some programs it also enables international engagement across time zones. Asynchronous

instructors described pedagogical practices adapted to maintain connection despite time-shifted engagement: recorded lectures with personal introductions, creating video responses to student discussion posts, and designing asynchronous activities that still try to foster peer interaction and recognition.

UHI's flexible engagement models enable multiple modes of participation within single courses. Students might attend some sessions synchronously while accessing others through recordings, participate via text chat when video isn't possible, or engage through collaborative documents when real-time interaction is challenging. This multiplicity of engagement options reflects a complex understanding of the diverse circumstances Highland and island students may face, and the supports they need to maintain engagement in educational programming.

In addition to supporting flexibility in formal learning environments, UHI has pioneered development of "*digitally rich spaces*" in community locations. These spaces in libraries, museums, and regional study centers extend UHI's reach and impact within Highland and island communities, creating physical nodes for digital engagement and learning. These spaces provide high-quality internet connections, appropriate technology, and crucially, human support for those less confident with digital tools, and serve as recognition that fully online education may not serve all community members equally.

Digital practices and extended UHI "*spaces*" also extend to informal community building through various platforms. Student WhatsApp groups, staff Teams channels, and social media connections create multiple layers of digital belonging that complement formal educational structures. These informal digital spaces often prove as important as formal ones in fostering sense of community and connection across the distributed institution.

### **3.2.3 Bridging: Mutual constitution of digital and cultural practices.**

A socio-technical analysis of UHI staff's discussions of belonging, particularly in relation to digital programming, indicates that technology and culture operate as mutually constitutive forces rather than separate domains. UHI's approach to digital practice demonstrates cultural values shaping technological implementation: the Highland emphasis on personal relationships and face-to-face communication influences how asynchronous learning opportunities are framed, as supporting learners to stay in place and work and raise families. Likewise, where possible in synchronous learning, staff prioritize digital practices of interaction and personal connection over the use of tools optimized for content delivery or administrative efficiency. But digital and

online learning practices are also narrated as a key element in the bridging of culture and education: the institution's use of video conferencing is less about technology than commitment to serving dispersed communities.

This metaphor of bridging was popular among participants trying to reflect the ways in which culture and education shape each other at UHI. UHI's learning centres were articulated as transformative bridges between traditional or local values and contemporary educational needs and opportunities. Such bridging requires constant negotiation and reflexivity: staff described ongoing conversations within the institution about when educational change serves cultural purposes and when it might undermine them. Teaching staff described various strategies for building bridges specifically through technology, including opportunities for peer interaction, maintaining availability for one-on-one support, preparing thoroughly to be "*spot on*" since video conferencing requires more focused attention, responding quickly to student emails, and offering one-on-one video meetings for specific needs.

The digital infrastructure of SMO enables it to be both locally rooted and globally connected, creating opportunities for diaspora communities to maintain linguistic and cultural connections. Traditional Gaelic graduation ceremonies now incorporate streaming, and recording capabilities enable cultural knowledge preservation while maintaining accessibility, with traditional songs, stories, and linguistic variations captured for future generations. Perhaps most significantly, digital tools support local and global cultural connections simultaneously. Students can remain physically rooted in their communities while participating in global Gaelic networks, accessing international expertise while contributing to local cultural preservation. This represents a fundamental shift from historical patterns where cultural participation often required geographic displacement, demonstrating how digital practices can support new forms of cultural belonging.

Across the institution, technology was primarily valued when it was seen as supporting rather than supplanting human-centered concepts of culture and belonging. Similarly, it seemed to be agreed by most staff that institutional initiatives are most successful when they do not directly contravene local power relations or social understandings. This caution appeared to stem not from conservatism for its own sake, but rather from an understanding that educational transformation must respect and work within existing cultural structures to be sustainable.

The staff discourse at UHI is one of resistance to technological determinism, focusing instead on educational and cultural purposes. When platforms change - as in recent transitions from Blackboard Collaborate to Teams - staff professional development was reported as focusing on

maintaining pedagogical approaches and relationships rather than simply incorporating new technical features. This reinforces the idea of technology as servant rather than master of educational purposes, and reflects the emphasis that UHI puts on professional and digital learning opportunities. The centralized LTA scaffolds professional recognition schemes to surface and validate good work among staff, and to build connection across the distributed institution. Offerings include formal and informal learning: mentoring circles and networks, peer review, artifacts sharing, and a Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy all aim to generate pathways for growth, since staff commit to staying in the region. The virtual mentoring circles particularly demonstrate how digital tools can create new forms of professional community and belonging. Teaching staff's literate and human-focused discussions of online and open learning reflect an educational culture that centres belonging.

#### **3.2.4 Distance without scale.**

UHI's relatively small class sizes are also a core element in its capacity to offer meaningful engagement despite geographic distribution. The institution harnesses the benefits of distance without scale in a way that is increasingly difficult for many larger academic entities in this neoliberal era, and this capacity represents a crucial strength. Teaching staff are able to emphasize personalized attention and relationship building in service of belonging, in ways that are often impossible in large lecture formats or massified online delivery formats. While not all classes at UHI are small, there was clear understanding that size matters and plays a part in enabling everyone to participate meaningfully or – even in asynchronous models – to receive meaningful personalized feedback.

A key overall takeaway from the study is that belonging and engagement require human-scale, relational interactions, even in digital environments. Small class sizes enable instructors to know students individually, provide personal and meaningful feedback, and adapt to diverse needs. It also enables students in synchronous courses to create meaningful peer connections where they wish to, and to build networks of mutual support. The approach prioritizes educational quality and student success over enrollment maximization. This positions UHI distinctively in a higher education landscape increasingly driven by scale economies.

The benefits of distance without scale extend throughout institutional practices. Small cohorts in specialized programs develop strong professional identities, and regional campuses maintain distinctive characters rather than becoming anonymous nodes. Staff can innovate and respond to local needs rather than implementing standardized approaches. The human scale of UHI's

operations, maintained despite geographic distribution, emerges as fundamental to its success in fostering belonging.

## 4. Conclusion.

This case study showcases aspects of how UHI successfully integrates place-based commitment with human-centered learning approaches. Staff actively foster belonging through digital and cultural practices, creating educational experiences that enable personal and professional development in Scottish Highland and island communities.

UHI is not without its challenges: its distributed nature means that staff's primary sense of belonging is often to their local academic partners over the federated whole, and the study identified tensions between institutional and local cohesion. However, the findings showcased here highlight UHI's strengths: decades of digital practice expertise, a core mission enabling education without displacement, successful balance of cultural preservation with educational change, professional development and recognition systems supporting distributed staff learning and growth, and maintenance of human-scale relational engagement despite geographic distribution. These strengths position UHI as an important exemplar for distance and digital education as well as for rural and distributed higher education contexts globally. UHI's digital and cultural practices of belonging serves as a positive model for institutions that seek to foster meaningful and participatory relationality, and to keep educational values rather than scale at the centre of their mandate and operations.

As higher education around the globe grapples with questions of funding, relevance, and sustainability, UHI demonstrates that an institution can prioritize belonging, community connection, and cultural values, while embracing human-centered digital innovation and distributed education. Perhaps the lesson UHI teaches is that institutions should know the people and place(s) they serve. Belonging at UHI emerges from an intersection of place, culture, and participatory digital practice, as a cultivated relational quality. In a higher education landscape increasingly dominated by competition, standardization, and urban-centric assumptions about educational excellence, distributed education pathways that serve communities as well as individuals are a rare and valuable alternative model. UHI's unique, geographically and digitally-distributed federation is a transformative force for regional development and cultural sustainability, and one that serves as a powerful counterpoint to automated visions for 21st century tertiary education

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