BELONGING & PLACE:
A UHI STRENGTHS-BASED CASE STUDY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

OVERVIEW:

This report synthesizes findings from a strengths-based case study on belonging, place, and digital practices, conducted across the federated network of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) in 2024-2025. Based in over thirty individual and group interviews with staff across eight academic partner campuses and Executive Office, the project reveals how UHI's distributed structure creates both opportunities and challenges for fostering belonging in digital and physical spaces. The findings demonstrate that belonging at UHI is fundamentally place-based and relational, and is supported by participatory and connection-focused digital practices. The study also identifies tensions between local identities and institutional cohesion, and offers strategic directions for building on the strengths identified to foster continued belonging in this challenging global era in further/higher education.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING AT UHI:

Across UHI's federated network, concepts of belonging are deeply rooted in **connection to place and community**. UHI staff were generally found to prioritize **local ties** and **regional sustainability**. This place-based understanding foregrounds the strong connections between Highland geography, culture, and identity, positioning UHI as an enabler of community sustainability rather than a catalyst for outmigration. UHI's distributed nature creates a complex, **multi-layered** experience of belonging that operates simultaneously at program, campus, and institutional levels. Staff consistently reported stronger connections to their immediate campus communities and specific programs than to the broader UHI federation.

The pedagogical foundation of belonging at UHI centers on **relationships** and **support structures**. The Personal Academic Tutor (**PAT**) system was highlighted by multiple participants as a central element in building student belonging, with staff emphasizing the critical importance of creating safe spaces for **transformation** and **identity development**. Teaching staff's digital practices reflect this relationship-centered approach, with longtime practitioners describing intentional shifts from broadcast models to interactive engagement.

Cultural preservation also emerges as a critical dimension of belonging, particularly evident in Gaelic-medium programs where language serves as a vehicle for **cultural continuity**. Staff across the institution consciously work to support and maintain **cultural 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. **Change is valued** but so is continuity.

Beyond place and culture, staff at UHI conceive of belonging through the lens of **professional identity and development**. The institution's strengths in scaffolding workplace learning, creating pathways for growth, and building capacity across local professional communities emerge as crucial dimensions of institutional belonging.

UHI'S DIGITAL CULTURE:

UHI staff almost universally discuss digital practices as fundamentally **pedagogical and relational** rather than merely technical. In interviews, digital tools were conceptualized as "fertilizer" for relationships rather than substitutes for human connection. Participants emphasized **humanizing online learning** spaces, and focused on enabling presence and connection while maintaining authentic engagement.

UHI's digital offerings are comprised of a **balance** of synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities with flexible scheduling. Evening online classes that accommodate local employment and family commitments were particularly mentioned. While in some cases synchronous, interactive digital engagement and video conferencing are prioritized over asynchronous content delivery, staff noted that asynchronous options have real value for "non-traditional" learners, particularly those with employment and family responsibilities. Making asynchronous learning as **human-focused as possible** is recommended as a key priority for UHI, going forward, as it would consolidate key strengths of the institution.

Beyond formal learning environments, UHI has developed "**digitally rich spaces**" in community locations like libraries and museums, as well as **virtual mentoring circles** and **professional recognition portfolios** that validate staff expertise across campuses. These practices reflect intentional cultivation of belonging within professional and cultural circles.

UHI's approach is one in which cultural values – in terms of local and institutional culture, both – shape technological implementation. An emphasis on **presence and relationships** in Highland culture emerged in the interviews, and appears to align with a parallel emphasis in pedagogical approach. Interviewees noted being "calculated, or at least cautious" in introducing practices that might threaten conventional power relations or social balance. Overall, technology was framed as a "magnifying glass" for pedagogy, and positioned as supporting rather than supplanting **human-centered** concepts of culture and belonging.

The project emphasized how **technology can support cultural practices** when implemented thoughtfully. Recording capabilities allow cultural knowledge preservation and expand accessibility, demonstrating the potential of digital tools to help maintain and build interest in traditional knowledge. Overall, digital infrastructure enables UHI to be both locally rooted and globally connected, fostering a sense of **identity** within local communities while also expanding **economic and educational opportunities**.

KEY STRENGTHS OF UHI:

A fundamental strength of UHI is its **distributed structure**, underpinned by the consistent assertion that communities of the Highlands and Islands are **vital places to live, grow, and thrive**. In a region where learners traditionally have had to leave to get an education, and often did not return, the federated nature of UHI allows the institution to challenge both outmigration and centralization, supporting individual growth and localized sustainability.

Unlike many distributed education models that prioritize scale, UHI maintains relatively **small class sizes** enabling meaningful engagement and a sense of students as more than numbers, whether synchronous or asynchronous. This "distance without scale" approach supports values of **personalized attention** and **relationship building** despite geographic distribution, supporting the institution's relational understanding of belonging.

UHI's distinctive **integration** of further education (FE) and higher education (HE) creates progression pathways that enable students to advance from secondary through postgraduate qualifications. Staff describe building long-term relationships that foster belonging and success. This 'ladder' especially benefits non-traditional students, with staff emphasizing how students can begin with practical FE courses and progress to degrees while maintaining employment and family responsibilities. The commitment to **multiple entry points** and FE to HE progression creates accessible on-ramps to higher education, enabling students to start where they are and advance at their own pace. The federated structure also **broadens possible course choices** and ensures a variety of learning pathways exist across the region.

Through the Learning & Teaching Academy (LTA), UHI has established **professional recognition schemes** that attempt to create advancement pathways in the institution. These systems aim to surface and share good practices while offering recognition to staff doing good work, creating programs of professional development accessible across the partnership.

The institution's emphasis on practical skills, cultural preservation, and connections between language, education, and economic opportunity are all strengths that ground it in a strong **sense of place and mission**, for staff. A **pragmatic tolerance** emerged as an important cultural manifestation of UHI's Highland character, with UHI campuses described as "surprisingly accepting of diversity despite the region being rural and relatively homogeneous demographically." This pragmatism was framed as creating space for diverse expressions of identity and belonging, while respecting existing community roles and relationships.

IN SUMMARY:

UHI offers a distinctive model of further/higher education that prioritizes connection to place and community while embracing digital innovation. This case study reveals an institution whose staff demonstrate deep commitment to fostering belonging through human-centered digital practices integrated with cultural and educational values. While facing challenges around resources, identity, and post-pandemic recovery, UHI's strengths position it as an exemplar for global, place-based digital and distributed higher education.

The findings suggest that UHI's future success depends on maintaining its distinctive mission while addressing structural challenges. This will require leaders who understand and value the unique – and dynamic – cultural needs of the region. Fully realizing the institution's potential as a transformative force for regional development and cultural sustainability will also require investment in infrastructure and staff-based support systems.

REPORT:

BACKGROUND:

This project has its origins in the #OER23 conference hosted by UHI in Inverness, where a Canadian digital educator was struck by UHI's hospitality, natural environment, and by its distributed and networked programs as presented in Anna-Wendy Stevenson's conference keynote. After #OER23, that Canadian – Dr. Bonnie Stewart of the University of Windsor – reached out to Dr. Keith Smyth, UHI's Dean of Learning, Teaching, and Students, about embarking on a strengths-based case study of belonging in place-based and digital learning at UHI. Designed to focus specifically on digital, cultural, and pedagogical practices related to belonging at UHI, the study would be based in staff's embedded perspectives as well as literature on belonging, digital affordances, and place-based learning.

This is the final report for that case study, as it emerged from those beginnings. Bonnie partnered with UHI's Learning and Teaching Academy (LTA) as a Visiting Fellow for the 2024-2025 academic year. In fall 2024, she engaged in a tour of seven academic partner campuses across the Highlands and Islands, and interviewed more than forty staff across eight sites, as well as at Executive Office. In late spring 2025, Bonnie returned to Scotland to present findings through a variety of lenses at UHI, as well as in an open online LTA Connect session.

This Belonging and Place project has aimed to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of how concepts of belonging – in the participatory digital sense and in the place-based sense – manifest and intersect in UHI's pedagogical practices and programs. Ultimately, the project surfaces ways in which digital technologies and their affordances are used in UHI's offerings. It examines how belonging and educational access are understood within the region and its communities, in the spirit of what hooks (2009) calls a culture of place. UHI's distributed structure, as well as its reliance on digital learning to ensure access to further and higher education in regional communities, combine to make it an optimal site for the study. In showcasing UHI, the project aims to turn ideas of peripherality and centrality on their heads. The project frames the place-based mandate of an institution situated outside global geographical and prestige centres as an exemplar for human-centered digital and distance learning, and explores how the digital pedagogy work being done at UHI could serve as a model for place-based education in other contexts/continents.

METHODOLOGY:

The primary research methodology for this project was case study, with specific focus on UHI's unique geographical, cultural, and educational characteristics. The project's examination of how belonging operates within a distributed institution aligns with the specific focus of a strengths-based case study. Semi-structured qualitative interviews with UHI staff across multiple campuses were the primary form of data collection, with participants discussing perspectives on belonging, digital practices and cultural foundations at UHI in 60-90 minute recorded interviews.

Bonnie obtained a research ethics exemption for the project from the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board, as the study "collects information from authorized personnel to release information or data in the ordinary course of their employment." Staff who contributed to the project were invited by the LTA to speak with Bonnie, in the regular course of their work. They were provided with the UWindsor exemption certificate outlining the purposes of the case study as well as its strengths-based nature and its focus on the intersections of belonging, place, and digital practices. Bonnie conducted most interviews in person, though a few were solely Teams-based due to unanticipated illness. All interviews but one – for which notes were taken due to internet issues – were recorded and automatically transcribed by Teams.

As a research approach, strengths-based case study methodology can provide contextual understandings of complex systems, offering both insider perspectives on organizational functioning and insights into capacities, successes, and resilience factors that traditional problem-focused approaches might overlook. Semi-structured interviews allow staff to articulate their experiences of the organization and its strengths on their own terms, revealing tacit knowledge, informal processes, and contributing factors. Questions inquired about participants' understandings and experiences of belonging, digital practice, place, and local culture, the intersections between each, and UHI's strengths relative to each. The interviews were centered in strengths-focused appreciative inquiry techniques, emphasizing understandings, insights, valued contributions, and core factors rather than definitions or problems. However, Bonnie did not steer away from conversations that turned to challenges faced by UHI, and those perspectives are included in the mirror held up by this report.

Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified key patterns, synthesizing findings across multiple interviews and across core questions. Various dimensions of the research, such as key digital practices, sociotechnical intersections, and strengths and challenges of UHI in relation to belonging were all systematically identified, hand-coded, and categorized. Some transcripts were also put into Claude AI Opus 4 for comparative theming, with resonant results from Claude triggering revisitation of the original transcripts and incorporation of elements overlooked in hand-coding. However, fewer than half of the thirty+ transcripts were themed by AI: that layer of additional theming was reserved for particularly long or multi-vocal interviews. Bonnie also drew from causal layered analysis as a methodological structure, encouraging exploration of systemic causes, worldviews, and myth levels of key ideas that emerged in the themes.

KEY DIMENSIONS OF BELONGING:

Place-Based Connection as Foundation: Dùthchas

Across UHI's federated network, concepts of belonging appear deeply connected to sense of place and community. The term 'Dùthchas,' a Gaelic term for an ecological, kin-based, place-based idea of the interconnectedness of people, land, and culture, appeared more than once during interviews and conversations. The term encapsulates the spirit and purpose of this research project: it includes ideals of heritable trusteeship, and responsibilities as well as rights. Often framed as a concept of belonging, home, or birthright, Dùthchas historically held that land was a communal entity to which people belonged, and a source of collective identity. The spirit of Dùthchas is visible in UHI programs designed to serve local needs, in

the emphasis on students remaining in their communities while studying, in research focused on local challenges and opportunities, and in the complex negotiations between traditional knowledge and contemporary academic approaches. This relational sense of belonging and place echoed throughout the research data, and appears to permeate local understandings of what UHI is for and how it should operate, even when not directly deployed.

In more traditional universities, overarching institutional identity often takes precedence, particularly on regional campuses or satellites. Across UHI, however, staff tended to prioritize local ties and regional connections over a sense of brand or belonging to the federated entity. Rather than education as pathway away from place - the traditional Highland experience of talented youth leaving for universities in Edinburgh, Glasgow, or London – at UHI, education is framed as strengthening local ties.

Staff's conception of belonging tends to emphasize strong connections between geography, culture, and identity, positioning UHI as an enabler of community sustainability rather than a catalyst for outmigration. 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 staff's construction of local culture. In the islands, certainly at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig but also in interviews with Lewis and Skye staff more broadly, an historical and distinctly Gaelic sense of place was particularly salient. 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.

Educational practices across UHI incorporate and validate place-based knowledge systems that might be marginalized in traditional academic contexts. An Adventure Studies instructor emphasized that "where you go should feature in what you do while you do it and what it means." Rather than treating Highland landscapes as mere backdrops for outdoor activities, that program increasingly incorporates understanding 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. These approaches challenge academic hierarchies and honour embedded local knowledge.

The research revealed consistent emphasis across campuses on the institution's role in combating historical patterns of youth leaving the region for education and never returning. Staff frame their work not just as educators but as enablers of a form of belonging that actively resists the 'brain drain' that has historically affected Highland and island communities. Staff described ongoing negotiations about how to balance academic rigor with respect for local ways of knowing, how to assess place-based learning outcomes, and how to prepare students for careers that value both formal qualifications and local understanding. These negotiations reflect sophisticated engagement with questions of epistemology and power in Highland contexts. In almost all contexts, belonging was framed as opening up lives and livelihoods within local communities and the region more broadly.

Multi-Layered Institutional Belonging

The distributed nature of UHI creates a complex, multi-layered experience of belonging that operates simultaneously at program, campus, and institutional levels, described by one participant described as a 'constellation' of belonging rather than a unified institutional identity. Staff report stronger connections to their immediate campus communities and specific programs than to the broader UHI network.

This localized belonging appears strongest in specialized programs that have developed distinct identities through specific cultural practices, branding, and shared professional pathways. Aviation at Perth, for instance, fosters strong program identity and specific traditions, as well as distinct career trajectories. Similarly, Gaelic-medium education at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig creates a powerful sense of belonging through shared linguistic and cultural mission. These program-level identities do not preclude belonging to the broader institution, but reflect affiliations and loyalties that are strengthened by day-to-day common purpose.

Professional services staff report relatively clear professional development pathways through recognition schemes and cross-campus mentoring networks, while academic staff more often noted tensions between local college and overall university identities. Common themes across staff groups included pride in serving local communities, commitment to widening access, and appreciation for flexible working arrangements.

Relational Foundations

The foundation of belonging at UHI is relationships and support structures, with human connection consistently centered by staff the critical factor in building belonging across all dimensions of the institution. This relational approach extends beyond formal support systems to encompass the deliberate cultivation of peer connections, community ties, and professional networks within colleges and across the institution. However, the Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) system, structuring 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 relationship-building practices rather than from institutional structures or technological systems alone. Across 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 – mostly discussed by participants in the context of their own individual campus – 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 across the study on as a way of discussing the intentional work done on campuses to make belonging happen for students. It also emerged, in one case, 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 relational pedagogies and flexible delivery methods that allow students to balance work, family, and education. Staff encompass diverse modes of engagement, recognition of different learning styles, and accommodation of various life circumstances. As one staff member noted, "belonging does not require uniform participation."

Language as Living Culture

The presence of Gaelic is variable across UHI campuses, but is a visible – and sometimes audible – presence in many locales. At SMO, with its Gaelic-medium programs and mandate, language education transcends simple presence and skill transmission and becomes an immersive site of complex cultural negotiations. Interviews at SMO tended to emphasize 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. As one instructor noted, "our language is living, thankfully, still. So it's not fossilized...it's not just a bunch of, you know, prescripts and no flexibility to it."

This need for flexibility shapes pedagogical approaches throughout Gaelic programs at UHI. 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.

Cultural Navigation and Preservation

Local Gaelic and Highland culture(s) and their preservation can also sometimes be a site of tension or navigation between community and institution. Cultural preservation requires sensitivity to hierarchies, traditions, and power dynamics. Sometimes, institutions preserve or value heritage differently from locals. With regards to language, an SMO staff member noted that she has become an "advocate for Gaelic immersion all the time…because there are still people within the workplace and within the wider community who don't get it." Pressure to ensure "English after the same" in Gaelic education contexts was noted, as well as resistance from older community stakeholders regarding campus development decisions.

Beyond language, "traditional Highland values" were also 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. The conservatism of rural communities and Highland culture was noted, as well as a deep-seated social reluctance to challenge established orders. One participant observed, "There's a fear of using your voice, like upsetting people...we're all far too well behaved."

"Live and Let Live" Cultural Ethos

At the same time, 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." One participant noted that the very existence of a higher education space in the 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.

This ethos and the existence of institutional spaces within it appear to combine to create a hybrid cultural space for transformation and personal development within otherwise conservative social contexts. It also enables UHI partner colleges to serve as sites for transformation while maintaining community connections, creating space for both. This asserts that Highland communities can accommodate change and diversity within established structures rather than requiring complete breaks with tradition.

It was also accepted 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. Flexible pathways for

engagement in learning, therefore, were spoken about as ways of honouring these variances in student needs for connection and community.

Professional Identity and Development

Beyond place and culture, UHI staff also discussed belonging through the lens of professional identity and development. The LTA scaffolds professional recognition schemes and systems to 'surface and validate good work' and to try to build connection across the distributed institution. These offerings bridge formal and informal learning: mentoring circles and networks, peer review, artifacts sharing, and the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Strategy are all initiatives aimed at making UHI "a good place to be." Each tries to generate clear pathways for growth, since staff commit to staying in the region. These initiatives validate and share staff expertise across campuses, creating connections that transcend geographic boundaries while maintaining local rootedness. 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 a culture that blends and centers belonging for staff and students.

Staff participants generally agreed that feeling connected to their professional fields and having opportunities for advancement constitutes a crucial dimension of institutional belonging for them. However, the distributed structure of UHI does create challenges for developing coherent professional identities and belonging. Staff navigate multiple simultaneous modes of connection to program, campus, and the broader institution, and tend to report stronger ties to their immediate professional communities and to local partner colleges than they do to UHI as a whole. The fact that the institution offers both further and higher education but that most recognition schemes – particularly at the UK level – are higher education-focused creates additional division. Despite these challenges, there remains powerful commitment to UHI's distinctive approach to education, with staff deeply invested in an institutional model that prioritizes connection to place and community while enabling professional advancement through flexible, digitally-enabled pathways.

DIGITAL PRACTICES FOR BELONGING & CONNECTION:

Humanizing Online Spaces

Digital practices at UHI tended to align with and reflect the overall relationship-centered understanding of belonging that emerged in the study, with participatory methods of online education key to the institution's digital approach. Staff framed technology as enabling presence and connection across distances while maintaining authentic engagement, requiring intentional cultivation of human elements within digital spaces. Open resources and frameworks also enhance flexibility and accessibility across the distributed institution.

UHI has decades of experience with distributed learning: many interviewees noted that the institution was a leader in online and digitally-supported education long before the pandemic made such practices mainstream. 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.

UHI staff thus tended to frame their digital practices as fundamentally pedagogical and relational rather than merely technical. One participant called digital tools 'fertilizer' for relationships, fostering but not replacing human connections. 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.

In language classes, humanizing online learning was presented as of particular importance, and a means of building comfort, comprehension, and belonging. One instructor at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig emphasized how they "always take time to personally address students at the start of class and to create space for conversation, especially when students may be quite anxious about speaking aloud in Gaelic."

The strategic use of breakout rooms was repeatedly emphasized as an important humanizing practice across disciplines and content, with multiple instructors noting that they carefully design small 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."

Flexible Engagement Models

UHI's digital practices balance synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities with flexible scheduling that reflects Highland and island life patterns, directly supporting the institution's place-based mission. 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 allows for 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.

The flexible engagement models extend to encompass 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.

Digitally Rich and Extended Spaces

Beyond formal learning environments, UHI has pioneered development of "digitally rich spaces" in community locations. These spaces in libraries, museums, and regional study centers extend the reach and impact of higher education within Highland and island communities, creating physical nodes for digital engagement with 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.

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 technological enthusiasm than commitment to serving dispersed communities.

UHI's learning centres were, across participant interviews and conversations, articulated as transformative 'bridges' between traditional or local values and contemporary educational needs and opportunities. This bridging requires constant negotiation and reflexivity: staff describe ongoing conversations about when educational change serves cultural purposes and when it might undermine them. Technology is valued when it supports rather than supplants human-centered concepts of culture and belonging. 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.

It was agreed by most staff that institutional initiatives are most successful when they do not directly contravene local power relations or social understandings. This caution reflects not conservatism but rather an understanding that educational transformation must respect and work within existing cultural structures to be sustainable.

Staff discourse actively resists technological determinism, instead focusing on educational and cultural purposes. When platforms change - as in recent transitions from Blackboard Collaborate to Teams - staff focused on maintaining pedagogical approaches and relationships rather than simply incorporating new technical features. This demonstrates an understanding of technology as servant rather than master of educational purposes.

At Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, digital environments allow dispersed Gaelic speakers to form learning communities while simultaneously negotiating between traditional and contemporary language use. Digital infrastructure at 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 distributed participation via 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.

STRENGTHS OF UHI AS A PLACE-BASED FEDERATION:

Digital Innovation with Human Connection

As noted throughout the report, UHI staff approach digital education from a relational, educational perspective that balances technological capabilities with human connection. This strength emerges from decades of experience with digital and distance learning, grounding initiatives and staff in well-established digitally literate practices. Staff observations that effective digital spaces are "not just repositories but active teaching spaces that go beyond content delivery" capture this connection-focused understanding: the culture of UHI does not position tradition and innovation as opposites. Instead, staff demonstrate understanding that digital tools can strengthen traditional knowledges by enabling wider participation, and global connections can reinforce local identities.

Digital education at UHI is also deeply entwined with open educational practice, which ensures that staff have access to frameworks and models for sharing their work and building their own participatory literacies and those of their students. The open approach to digital practice extends capacity for outreach beyond campus boundaries to communities, while continuing to centre digital practice in a place-based, relational way.

Human-centered digital innovation at UHI also extends to the institutional structures that support good practice. The LTA's professional recognition schemes require digital artifacts demonstrating innovative and relevant practice. Cross-campus mentoring circles use digital tools to connect expertise across the region, building professional ties as well as cross-community ties, and the institutional repository enables sharing of resources and approaches. These systems reflect the ways in which UHI is "its own natural laboratory" for developing digital education practices that could benefit the broader sector, as well as communities.

Sustaining Learning and Growth in Place

Perhaps UHI's greatest strength lies in its core mission of providing further and higher education access to students based in communities across the Highlands and Islands region. This mission helps to address historical patterns of depopulation driven by educational migration, but also creates a strong lifelong learning mandate and work opportunities within communities and the region overall.

This strength of access manifests in multiple dimensions. UHI offers geographic accessibility, through its distributed programs and online delivery, enabling students to access education from small towns, island communities, and glens far from towns. It also offers temporal flexibility and accessibility, through part-time, evening, and asynchronous course options that enable students to study while maintaining employment and family responsibilities. Economic accessibility through local delivery reduces living costs associated with relocation, and cultural accessibility through programs delivered in local contexts maintains community connections.

The impacts of flexible accessibility at UHI extends beyond individual students to community sustainability. Young people who might otherwise leave can stay and contribute to local economies and cultural continuity. Professionals can upskill without abandoning established careers, while parents can pursue education while maintaining family stability. Cumulatively, this creates new trajectories for regional *and* personal development, both retaining human capital that has been historically drained from Highland and island communities, and creating human flourishing possibilities for individuals within settlements and the region more generally.

Programs designed to meet specific regional needs serve as capacity-building engines: tourism and hospitality in areas dependent on visitor economy, renewable energy technologies in communities with wind and marine resources, health and social care addressing demographic challenges of aging rural populations, and creative industries building on cultural assets. UHI fosters local leadership through programs that develop management and entrepreneurship skills, and supports business development through research partnerships and knowledge exchange.

Particularly noteworthy is how economic empowerment intersects with cultural preservation. Gaelic language skills become economic assets in education, media, and tourism. Traditional crafts find new markets through contemporary business models, and environmental knowledge supports sustainable development. Cultural tourism builds on and helps to

preserve traditional local knowledge. These intersections of cultural and economic sustainability require flexibility, as markets shift, but help keep people in communities.

Integrated Further and Higher Education Pathways

Similarly, UHI's integration of further education (FE) and higher education (HE) creates progression pathways that enable students to advance from secondary through postgraduate qualifications, while remaining in their own communities. Multiple staff described the long-term relationships they developed with progressing students during their journeys. They also note how the existence of these 'next steps' – particularly between FE and HE – helps foster both belonging and a sense of possibility for many students, who may enter an area of study without knowing what range of options exist or how far they could go in a field.

The institution's commitment to "multiple entry points" for students allows learners to start where they are academically – e.g. National Certificate or Higher National Diploma – and advance at their own pace. This 'ladder' approach particularly benefits non-traditional students: they can begin with practical FE courses like hospitality or health care and progress to degrees while maintaining employment and family responsibilities. In some cases, learners go from further education through higher education and even into teaching in their fields, via UHI. One staff member, who started at UHI after having her own children and progressed through to being an instructor, noted that this comprehensive ecosystem serves as an on-ramp for students who might not otherwise consider university study. Another participant asserted that it enables "everybody in this region to reach their full academic potential without ever having to leave their job or their home."

The federated structure of the institution also broadens possible course choices and ensures a variety of learning pathways exist across the region and reflect the region. Adventure education programs increasingly incorporate Highland cultural history and place-based knowledge into technical training, while history programs validate oral traditions alongside documentary evidence. Business programs consider crofting and community enterprise models alongside conventional corporate approaches. Each of these content areas and more reflect learning opportunities deeply embedded in local values and industries, integrated across teaching levels, thus opening up both learning and employment pathways.

Professional Recognition and Development Systems

UHI has developed professional recognition schemes that support a culture of staff learning and digital literacies, aimed at fostering staff development across a diverse and federated network. These recognition systems are grounded in the reality that some staff may be the only subject specialist in their area or on their campus, or may specialize in pedagogies rather than content or research. This means they may not be served by conventional 'academic' schemes of professional development and recognition, particularly in a system that includes FE teaching staff. But UHI's LTA and local campus decision-makers all emphasized the importance of meaningful recognition of colleagues doing excellent work, and of creating opportunities for them to continue to learn, grow, and share their growth.

Professional development includes the building of communities of practice across the partnership. Central programs of professional development activities are delivered online or in blended formats so as to enable staff participation, regardless of location. Mentoring circles connect expertise across geography and disciplines, while the institutional repository shares resources and innovations across the UHI network.

This centralized strength particularly benefits smaller partner colleges that might otherwise struggle to provide development opportunities for their staff. Staff at smaller campuses can generally access the same professional development as those in Inverness or Perth. Recognition and professional development schemes also enable subject specialists to connect with colleagues who teach or work in similar areas across the partnership. These systems demonstrate how a distributed institution can create advantages from its structure rather than simply managing disadvantages.

Distance Without Scale

UHI's relatively small class sizes appear to be core to 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 generally impossible in large lecture formats or massified online delivery formats. Staff consistently mentioned optimal online class sizes of approximately fifteen students, enabling everyone to participate meaningfully or – even in asynchronous models – to receive meaningful personalized feedback.

This strength reflects the overall takeaway from the study, 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 both for academics and later career trajectories. 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.

KEY DIGITAL CHALLENGE:

Balancing Access with Engagement

While digital delivery enables unprecedented access to higher education across the Highlands and Islands, it creates persistent tensions around student engagement and community formation. The very flexibility that makes education accessible – asynchronous options, recorded lectures, minimal campus attendance requirements – can also enable disengagement. Staff describe students who participate minimally, accessing just enough content to complete assessments without building connections to peers or institution.

This challenge reflects deeper tensions in UHI's mission. The institution exists to serve students who might not otherwise access higher education, including those with complex life circumstances that make traditional engagement difficult or unlikely. Yet from the relational, human perspective fostered at UHI, approaches such as peer learning, professional networks, community connections and other engagement-related supports are understood by staff as key to educational success, especially for non-traditional learners. Staff find themselves thus constantly negotiating between maintaining accessibility and fostering the engagement necessary to provide meaningful educational experiences.

The balance becomes particularly complex in blended delivery models where some students attend in person while others participate online. Instructors describe challenges creating equitable experiences, often needing to "split seminars" or adapt activities because certain pedagogical approaches don't translate across modalities. The tension extends to assessment and progression decisions, including how much engagement can be required without undermining accessibility, and how community participation can be encouraged without penalizing those unable to participate? These questions are not unique to UHI in contemporary FE and HE circles, but they lack easy answers and require acknowledgement.

CONCLUSION:

The University of the Highlands and Islands successfully integrates place-based commitment with strong human-centered learning approaches to serve dispersed communities. This case study reveals an institution whose staff actively foster belonging through thoughtful integration of digital practices with cultural values, creating educational experiences that enable personal and professional development in Highland and island communities.

The findings highlight UHI's strengths: engaging digital practices developed through decades of experience, a core mission enabling education without displacement, successful balance of cultural preservation with educational change, professional development and recognition systems supporting distributed staff, 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 is a positive model for institutions that seek to foster belonging, and to keep educational values rather than scale at the centre of their mandate and operations.

To preserve and build on the strengths of this institution, UHI leaders are encouraged to focus on the sociotechnical and cultural dynamics that make it distinctive, working with its unique, tertiary, geographically and digitally-distributed grounding across the region. As a distributed federation, the institution currently serves as a transformative force for regional development and cultural sustainability.

This case study shows how belonging at UHI emerges from an intersection of place, culture, and open, digital pedagogy, as a relational, human quality that thrives with cultivation and support. The study suggests that the world look to UHI for meaningful ways of entwining digital practice, community sustainability, and cultural values within higher education in the second quarter of the 21st century. In an FE/HE 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, deserving protection and celebration.