SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND EDUCATIONAL IMPACTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN BRITISH COLUMBIA ON THE REGION DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. This article casts light on various impacts of the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) on the region development. The main aim of this article is to analyze the impact of the University of Northern British Columbia in broader terms by discussing the impact of the university on educational development, population, society and culture in the region. This article makes comparison with the impact of other universities previously built in other parts of the circumpolar north. The article reveals the main problems that the UNBC faces in the North of the country. This article emphasizes the role of the society on establishing university and its response to the university educational needs of Northern British Columbia.

Keywords: UNBC, regional impact, university, British Columbia, education, population development, society development, cultural development,

Introduction

The University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) was created as the fourth publicly founded university in the province of British Columbia in June, 1990. It was the first university built in the Northern part of the province. The university was officially opened by the Queen in August, 1994 and enrolled 14000 students in the Fall of that year (Weller, 1998, p. 282).

The region in which UNBC is located is much like the northern parts of many other provinces including Ontario, Manitoba, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Quebec (Weller, 1984). These regions, in turn, are much like the Northern regions of many other countries such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, the USA (Alaska), and Russia.

Northern British Columbia constitutes two-thirds of the province. It has very varied geography and topography and is a place of great scenic beauty. It is also a place of abundant natural resources. However, most of the region has severe climate conditions and only limited parts of it are suitable for agriculture.

The economy of the region is based on resource industry and many communities are dependent upon a single resource. This is even true characteristic of the largest center, Prince George. The forest industry is important throughout the region as well as mining industry. Fisheries are important on the west coast and oil and natural gas are significant in the north east. Scattered small agricultural businesses throughout the region but especially in the northern and central interior. However, the resource based northern economy is not doing very well. It constitutes a declining proportion of total provincial economic activity. As a result many sectors, such as mining, are in very serious trouble. All of the mare becoming increasingly capital intensive thus slowing or limiting creation.

Thus Northern British Columbia has a relatively poor infrastructure, as well as poor health status, and educational achievement levels. Road, rail and air communications are all essentially structured for the extraction of raw materials. In terms of telecommunications the region falls behind most of the rest of the country. In addition, educational achievements indications are lower for the North than for the South despite the coming of colleges in the late 1960’s and their offering of the first two years of university level courses (Weller, 1998).

The problem to be addressed is the fact that the structure of university education in British Columbia doesn’t serve the needs of the North for the following reasons:

1) access is limited by distance and cost;
2) the ability of the employers of the North to recruit employees who will stay in the North is limited;
3) the economy of the North needs diversification;
4) public school education, healthcare and other services need are generally below provincial average service levels;
5) the quality of life is restricted by lack of cultural and intellectual activities.

Method
The research methods we used are: theoretical and comparative analysis, synthesis, the method of studying educational and historical documents. Thus we discovered and analyzed printed and electronic sources which investigate the impact of the university on the region development.

Results and Discussion
In 1987 a group of volunteers got together to discuss solutions to the problems. This resulted in developing the changed concept of the university for the North by sponsoring a petition; asking residents to pay $5 to add their name in support. Sixteen thousand residents made that statement. This phenomenal degree of response indicated that the need was well recognized. The supplement of the petition, a Northern British Columbia Opinion Study was commissioned by the Society and conducted by August Reid Associates Ltd., in October of 1988. There were several important findings in that report:
1. A vast majority of respondents, across all demographic and regional groupings, supposed that post-secondary education was more important at that time than ever;
2. Most residents of Northern British Columbia support the concepts of having more small, localized colleges, while the full 70% agreed that B.C. universities primary serve the needs of those in Vancouver and Victoria;
3. An overwhelming 87% of respondents agreed that there is an urgent need for a university in Northern British Columbia;
4. Three-quarters of the respondents cited that they strongly support the concept of the university in the North, and 17% indicated moderate support. Fully 92%, therefore, support the University of the North. The most common reason for support was that an interior university would make university more affordable and accessible for northern British Columbia residents wishing to attend.
5. Overall, 83% of those interviewed felt that the headquarters for a Northern university should be established in Prince George.

In October in 1988 the Society presented a position paper to the Cabinet of the Government of British Columbia. In March of 1989, the Society proposed to the Government of British Columbia the creation of a task force which would plan for the implementation of a solution to the university educational needs of Northern British Columbia and the Government developed the terms of reference for the Implementation Planning Group (Sadler, 1988).

Impact on education and knowledge
One of the major reasons for wanting a university in northern British Columbia was that it would markedly enhance access to the university education by northern students. The 'participation rate', as the number of High School graduates going on to the university is called, was 8% in northern British Columbia as compared with 24% in Vancouver area. By removing the financial barrier to access it was hoped that the construction of a university in the north would rapidly improve the participation rate. This was, indeed, what happened. The participation rate for northerners doubled to just short of 16% at the beginning of UNBC's first year of full operation, the academic year 1994-1995. This is clearly a considerable success and one regarded most positively by all concerned (Sadler, 1988).

Many UNBC faculty members have begun to conduct and publish research on northern British Columbia. Others have been appointed to provincial and national boards, commissions and other similar bodies. In this way UNBC will be fulfilling another role hoped of it, namely the taking of knowledge about the region to the rest of the world. The university will also be likely to produce specific knowledge as well as graduates that will help regional firms and services become more competitive. In this regard the university will become something of catalyst for development, especially if it has appropriate programs, appropriate research capacity and consciously tries to link with regional business via joint research and development, research parks and like.

UNBC was intended not only to take the knowledge of the region to the world but to also bring knowledge about the rest of the world to the region. This will be done via instruction on a wider range of
topics than previously existed. It will also be done via research on topics that may be of no direct relevance to the region. The university will also bring knowledge of the wider world to the region via the conferences and other events that it organizes that will bring people from many other places.

Impact on population
UNBC was intended to not only stem the outflow of population from the region but to create a highly educated inflow. To some degree it was a desire to reverse existing population trends and induce population growth once again. However, one of the main aims UNBC was the creation of a more educated workplace that would promote industrial diversification and growth by changing business locational decisions. In short, the university was seen as a major device for enhancing the level of human capital in northern British Columbia. Not every university would have these desired effects. Some might actually worsen the situation by training local people largely for out-migration to jobs that do not exist within the region or attract residents from outside the region who will simply move back to where they came from upon graduation. In other words, the creation of UNBC was intended to:

Improve the participation rate (to enhance the educational achievement levels of the local population in and in this way to increase the attractiveness of the region in locational terms for business and industry which, in turn, will likely increase population levels in region);

Increase more educational opportunities for regional residents;

Attract skilled migrants from elsewhere;

In its full year of operation UNBC employed some 280 people full time and 120 people part time. Of these 120 were faculty members. Most of the faculty and other senior employees were hired from outside the region. In addition about half of the students were attracted to UNBC from outside the region. These induced migrants brought with them skills and training from elsewhere much of which was not previously located in the region (Dahllof, 1988).

Experience at other northern universities, such as Lakehead in northern Ontario, indicates that a significant portion, though a minority, of those attracted to the north stay in the north. They add to the educational level of the regional population and, thereby, the attractiveness of the region in locational terms for business and industry.

The economic impact
The economic impact of a university in a frontier region is both direct and indirect. The building of the main campus of UNBC in Price George, which involved the expenditure of $137.5 million for construction and equipment purchases as well as an additional $8 million from other sources for access roads, was one of the direct impacts. The ongoing operating funds required by the university represent another direct impact. The regular operating funds received from the provincial government reached $24.85 million in the fiscal year 1995-1996 and will steadily increase as student numbers expand. Some 80% of the funds go to cover salaries most of which are spent in the region. The students fees, and other expenditures made by students while at the university, also represent a direct impact of significance. Also representing a direct impact is the vast majority of the money raised for scholarships and bursaries, some $7 million by the end of the 1994-1995 academic year, which in large part new money brought to the region that will be spent within the region. Such monies are expected to reach $20 million in a few years (Reid, 1992). Monies brought in for research purposes also represent a significant source of new funds for the region. In the first year of the university operation this only amounted to $1.5 million but the total should expand rapidly. In addition, various other university activities such as conferences and convocations will bring people and their expenditures to the region.

Because of the nature of a peripheral area such as Northern British Columbia there is strong reverse migration flows. Both of these phenomena are not well understood and are resented by many regional residents. Furthermore, the university will ‘seed’ the local economy both through human capital formation and by enhancing the social and cultural attractiveness of the area. The degree of success that the UNBC has will partially depend on how the university has structured itself and operates in the future. It will also partially depend on the ability of the region to absorb the products of the university. Northern British Columbia will benefit more because UNBC has been deliberately designed to have maximum impact within the confines of its resources. This means that it has appropriate degree offerings (by no means all of those needed) at both the undergraduate and graduate level, research that is regionally relevant, and close ties with regional business and groups.
UNBC has begun the process of enhancing the use of the human and physical resources of the region, of generating knowledge about the region, of developing technology relevant to the area, of assessing rational potential, fostering scientific and professional links with other regional organizations, and diffusing know-how and information about the experience of the similar regions elsewhere in the world. All of these actions will be of benefit to the regional economy and are likely to become steadily more extensive.

**Social and cultural impact**

A university in the mind of public is the very antithesis of a short term investment. A university presents permanence, stability and longevity. It introduces people, business and industry, is more likely to make new, bigger and longer term commitments to the region. Although those who have observed the effects of the coming of northern universities elsewhere indicate that some of the major effects are psychological ones. They are indirectly of great assistance to regional cultural, social and economic development. One of the main effects is to increase the level of self-confidence among the residents of the region (Dahllof, 1988).

The coming of a university to a region not only has an effect within that region but also outside it. Those living elsewhere see it a mark of the development of the region. Southerners will come to the north for the first time simply because the university exists. Many go back with their prejudices about the north confirmed but many others will go back with positive impressions. Either way knowledge of the north will spread more rapidly and more widely than would have been the case without a university. As the former mayor of Prince George frequently remarked that coming of UNBC has generally changed Prince George’s image from that of a pulp mill town to a university city.

**Conclusions**

A university of the North is viable and sustainable. To ensure that we have to structure the university in such a way that all aspects of post-secondary education in the North gain from its establishment. If the university is not established the youth of the North will leave and seek fulfillment elsewhere. What is needed in the North is the university which is independent, distinct, autonomous and locally controlled.

**References**


