The impact of a new university in a developing region: the case of the University of Northern British Columbia

Geoffrey R. Weller*

University of Northern British Columbia, 3333 University Way, Prince George, British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

This article analyses the impact of a new university, the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC), on a developing region. The educational, population, social, cultural, and economic effects of the coming of UNBC are assessed. The article compares the expected impacts with the actual, or likely, impacts. In doing so it makes comparisons with the impact of other universities previously built in other parts of the circumpolar north. The article concludes by arguing that impact of UNBC will not be as great as it might have been largely because it is not seen as part of a general regional development plan, but also because of a starting size that is too small in terms of programme range, a government focus on access issues, and intra-regional rivalry.

* Tel: 001 250 960-6488, fax: 001 250 962-9583; e-mail: weller@unbc.ca
1. Introduction

Most universities have measured their impact on their regions largely in terms of spending and employment. This article will analyse the impact of the new University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in broader terms by also discussing the impact of the university on educational development, population, society, and culture. In doing so a distinction will be made between the impacts that were expected and the likely actual impact of the university in the light of developments to date.

UNBC was created as the fourth publicly funded university in the province of British Columbia in June 1989 with the passage of the UNBC Act. It was the first university to be built in the northern part of the province and the first completely new university to be established in Canada in 25 years. It was mandated to serve the entire province of British Columbia but to give special emphasis to the needs of the northern two-thirds of the province. The university was officially opened by the Queen in August of 1994 and enrolled 1400 students in the Fall of that same year.

UNBC came into being as the result of much local pressure by the citizens of the region and by a few key people from Prince George, the largest city in the region. The idea of the university was sold on the basis of it having an impact on virtually every aspect of the society and the economy of the north as well as every community in the region. This promotion of the idea of a university gained support for the concept but it caused a crisis of expectations later on when it became realised that the impact would not be as extensive or, more particularly, as generally diffused throughout the region as quickly as expected. It was anticipated that the impact of the university would be to increase the participation rate in university education, increase the population of the region, help diversify the economy, and induce a cultural and social flowering within the region. In short the university was expected to be a panacea for all the regions perceived problems and the source of much of its hope for the future.

While a university in a peripheral region can have all these impacts this article argues that it is unlikely to have them all very quickly, especially if there is no overall regional development plan.

2. The regional setting

The region in which UNBC is located is typical of Canada’s northern frontier developing regions. It 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 U.S.A. (Alaska), and Russia (Weller, 1987). The greatest distinction possessed by northern British Columbia among this grouping is that it is the last part to be developed. The vast majority of the development that has occurred in northern British Columbia took place after the Second World War. This recent development is reflected in the fact that it the most recent part of the circumpolar north to acquire a university.