



The University of the Highlands and Islands is a partner in Soillse, a research collaboration established to provide a much enhanced research capacity to inform public policy towards the maintenance and revitalisation of Gaelic language and culture.

The Universities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow are also partners in the project, which aims to pool Gaelic language research capacity across the participating institutions.

Researchers based at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig UHI, studying different aspects of Gaelic language and culture, have published influential research findings. These are relevant both to sustaining Gaelic as a living culture and to the broader international debate on the chief cultural question of the twenty-first century – the challenge of sustaining global cultural diversity and assisting the 7,000 existing language groups to maintain their cultural and linguistic integrity.

# ***Sustaining Gaelic as a living language***

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Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin PhD



**Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin was appointed as Professor of Gaelic Research at the university in April 2014. He is academic director of Soillse.**

Prof Ó Giollagáin is a Dubliner who lived for many years in various Irish-speaking Gaeltacht areas. He has led extensive research projects and postgraduate initiatives in language planning and minority language culture and sociology and he has written extensively on issues concerning the sustainability of minority cultures, especially the Gaeltacht communities in Ireland.

Prof Ó Giollagáin previously lectured in the School of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) on the sociology of language, and has recently been appointed Adjunct Professor to the school. His teaching and research interests include language planning, sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. He was previously head of the Language Planning Unit at NUIG's Acadamh na hOllscolaíochta Gaeilge, where he devised and led Ireland's first MA programme in Language Planning.

Prof Ó Giollagáin co-authored the government-commissioned Gaeltacht survey *Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht* (2007). He also lectured in the Department of Irish in St. Patrick's College, Dublin City University, and in the Department of Celtic Studies in the Catholic University of Lublin, Poland. He has contributed as an external fellow of the National Institute for Regional and Spatial Analysis, National University of Ireland Maynooth, where he participated in a variety of research projects examining different aspects of the language dynamics and linguistic anthropology of minority language culture.

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Since joining the university, Professor Conchúr Ó Giollagáin has produced two studies on issues related to Gaelic and minority language vitality and to the challenges of minority language acquisition. He co-authored the *Update of the Comprehensive Linguistic Study of the Use of Irish in the Gaeltacht: 2006–2011* and contributed to a related publication, the *Analysis of Bilingual Competence: Language acquisition among young people in the Gaeltacht*.

These scientific studies depict the current vulnerable condition of Irish-speaking communities in the Irish Gaeltacht. The first was based on an analysis of current demographic data and the second is a comparative linguistic study of spoken ability in both Irish and English among young native speakers of Irish in the Gaeltacht.

The two main issues which have emerged, particularly in these studies, are that:

- minority language cultures require a relatively high density or a critical mass of active and socially-rooted speakers in order to resist the social pressures of assimilation into the majority linguistic culture
- young minority language speakers require a dynamic family and community socialisation process, encompassing rich and varied language inputs, in order to become competent and functional speakers of the minority language.

This study indicates that native speakers of Irish exhibit a condition of unbalanced bilingualism whereby language competence in their second language, English, outstrips their ability in their first language, Irish.

The Soillse team is currently engaged in *The Islands Gaelic Research Project*, an ambitious project which aims to study the current condition of Gaelic as a living community language in the Western Isles. A series of baseline studies will provide valuable data and, arising from this, analysis to inform language planning interventions in support of island communities who wish to participate in initiatives to bolster Gaelic. This follows on from a study led by Dr Gillian Munro on *The State of Gaelic in Shawbost*, and complements work by Professor Hugh Cheape on the ethnology of Gaelic culture – demonstrating issues of continuity and disruption in cultural transmission in both historical and contemporary contexts.

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