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Title	Local students at the local college: College-based Higher Education students and narratives of place and (im)mobilities
Session	Cheap, local and distinctive? Possible futures for college-based HE in competitive HE markets: evidence from Australia, Canada and England (Bathmaker)
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Abstract

The paper focuses on the language of the 'local', and its connection to College-based HE in England. It first shows how CBHE is depicted as 'local' provision in policy discourse, as well as how the provision is subject to local and national policy changes in both the Higher and Further Education sectors. The paper then explores the contrasting significations of the descriptor 'local' in these two sectors, before discussing the 'local' Higher Education student. Arguing that a college-based HE student's imagined future is produced through these narratives of place and mobility, the paper addresses issues of inequality and disadvantage that are implicit to these narratives. The paper draws on data from a study of two case study CBHE providers. The findings presented here refer to documentary and interview data, and show the importance of considering issues of place and locality in discussions of student experiences of HE.

Paper

My research context of college-based Higher Education (CBHE) in England is an example of the ways in which Higher Education is always constructed by, and constructive of, narratives about place, space and (im)mobility. Frequently described in policy and marketing discourses as 'local', CBHE provision varies nationally, in terms both of breadth of subjects offered, and numbers of students enrolled. Often, the range of this provision corresponds with national, marketised patterns of university-based Higher Education (HE) provision; in areas of the country where there are more universities, the range of subjects and number of students studying in Further Education (FE) colleges at degree level is likely to be smaller, though this is not always the case. However, CBHE is also part of the FE sector, in which the 2015 national policy of area reviews is working to increase efficiency and minimise repetition at a local level. CBHE therefore shares the market pressures of lower-ranked universities in the stratified English HE system and the managerial context of the FE sector. These combined place-based narratives are also reflected in the relationship between CBHE and the 'local'. In the university sector, the adjective 'local' is often seen in the context of the 'global' of elite HE (Marginson, 2006). An HE provider drawing on 'local' students, in this context, is unlikely to be seen as elite. The term 'local' therefore comes to stand for a narrative of lower-ranking alternatives to elite university provision. In the FE context, 'local' has different associations. The term is evocative of FE's longstanding relationships with 'local' businesses, communities and populations, and is represented as a source of pride and tradition (Hodgson and Spours, 2015). Because CBHE sits uneasily between the HE and FE

sectors in England, a description of it as ‘local’ provision might both euphemistically position it at the bottom of the national HE continuum, and, at the same time, as firmly rooted in a historical narrative of connection between educational institution and local community.

The term ‘local’ is also important to narratives of student (im)mobilities. As Christie (2007), Finn (2017), and Holdsworth (2006; 2009), point out, English HE is part of a historical narrative of mobility. The ‘traditional’ student leaves the family home in order to attend undergraduate education, and their mobility is assumed to be a part of their educational experience. In contrast, a ‘local’ student attends the HE institution nearest to their home, and does not change their living situation in order to begin studying at undergraduate level. Like the description of HE provision as ‘local’, the description of students as ‘local’ is far from neutral. The description brings with it associations between mobility and privilege, and therefore (im)mobility and disadvantage. Because CBHE overwhelmingly serves ‘local’ students (ETF, 2016), and because the provision is anyway understood as ‘local’ in terms of lower-ranked HE, and in terms of rootedness to its locality, these intertwined features of the ‘local’ produce understandings of CBHE students that are heavily implicated in narratives of place and immobility. As highlighted by Thomas’s (2015) study of part-time, mature students and university spaces

In order to explore these narratives, this study is based on research undertaken at two case study institutions. These are large providers of CBHE in England, both situated in post-industrial towns which do not have a university. These institutions are therefore already situated within narratives of lack of investment in HE, just as their student populations are implicated in narratives of immobility, attending CBHE rather than travelling further afield to attend universities. I define my cases as ‘outlier’ (Thomas, 2011) or ‘extreme’ (Yin, 2014) in that they are unusual CBHE institutions, offering a greater range of subjects and catering for more students than many FE colleges. As such, they further blur the boundaries between FE and HE provision, de-naturalising familiar narratives of each sector. In each case site, the study involved documentary analysis of marketing materials and policy documents, interviews with HE directors and tutors, and two rounds of interviews with final year undergraduate students on two courses at each college. I also conducted elite interviews with members of the executive committees of national college groups, in order to position the study’s examples of CBHE within a national context.

In this discussion of findings from the project, I focus on interviews with HE directors and tutors from each case study site, along with documentary analysis of marketing material and policy documents. My narrative analysis is informed by the ‘possible selves’ concept (Markus and Nurius, 1986). This concept suggests that present behaviour is influenced by personalised imaginings of ourselves in the future. In the context of my study of student experiences of CBHE, I see the concept enabling an analysis of how the ‘local’ as it is understood to stand for place-based issues of inequality and disadvantage, also shapes the futures that are possible for students to imagine. In the data focused on here, I explore the ways in which tutor and HE director narratives of the college’s locality and ‘local’ student population are productive of particular student futures. I also draw on policy documentation to show how the case colleges’ respective positions in the area review process contributes to shared narratives of their current and future financial viability. As a whole, this data

set demonstrates how these two similar case study sites are also deeply intertwined with their own locally-specific place-based narratives of locality. Understood as an example of English HE's positioning in narratives of place and mobility, the study argues that these narratives must be seen as shaping student experience, and students' imagined futures.

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