

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

0134

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'The island is your campus': Place and the geographies of island Higher Education

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Abstract: This paper focuses on island locations in the UK (eg. Channel islands, Isle of Man, Scottish islands) as examples of local Higher Education (HE) provision, bringing a unique perspective to international discussions of student mobilities and the relationship between place and education. Using the concept of 'local' capital within a sociological geographies framework to theorise educational subjectivity, the paper locates island HE within island-specific and UK-wide policy contexts, as well as exploring the experiences of students studying on islands. The paper presents findings from a multi-sited case study, first highlighting the conflict between local priorities and global relevance in developing HE provision on islands, and then drawing out narratives of island and mainland in order to think through the structural conditions of HE in each place, and the ways in which one place defines another. The paper demonstrates both the challenge and the importance of providing HE on island locations, as well as the ways in which HE on islands reveals the unseen spatial conditions of HE at a systemic level.

Paper: Discussions of remote geographies in Higher Education (HE) frequently focus on the practicalities of distance learning (Macintyre and Macdonald, 2011; Roos Breines, Raghuram and Gunter, 2019) or on migration decisions (Alexander, 2016); increasingly, however, there are opportunities for students in remote locations to study in face-to-face or blended learning environments. This paper therefore explores the new and changing relationships between remote geographies and HE, with a specific focus on island locations in and around the UK. Arguing that islands have particular geographies (Stratford, 2017), but that these specific geographies rely upon contested and ever-present relationships to the place of the mainland (Gill, 1994) the paper shows what can be learned from island contexts about the connections between HE and place. The paper reports on an exploratory study which used the concepts of 'local capital' and the 'spatial story' in order to understand HE students' decisions to remain on their home island to study, their experiences while studying, and their plans for the future. As discussed below, the project sought to position these accounts of student experiences within wider policy and marketing discourses. The concept of local capital is a response to Corbett's (2007) development of Bourdieu's capitals to include 'mobility capital'. In order to resist a deficit understanding of students' decisions to remain in place for degree

study (Finn and Holton, 2019), the concept allows for analysis of the economic, social and cultural investments made by such students. Working alongside this, the concept of the 'spatial story' (de Certeau, 1984) is used to explore how place(s) are relationally and subjectively defined and experienced. Together, these concepts are used to investigate what can be learned from these unusual educational contexts about the geographies of HE.

Data for this project was collected in two inter-connected stages. The first stage involved documentary analysis of HE policy documents and publicly available marketing materials for all islands with relationships to the UK. This analysis, conducted alongside a literature review of scholarship on HE in remote and island locations, used a process of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1993) that has previously been applied to college-based HE marketing materials (Henderson, 2018). The analytical process sought to establish the 'spatial story' of HE's relationship to its locality in each island context as represented in both policy and marketing discourses, and then to establish commonalities across island contexts in this regard. Following on from this first stage, the second stage of data collection used a multiple case study design (Thomas, 2011) to focus on three instances of island HE in detail. In each of the three case study colleges, tutors from two HE courses were interviewed using a semi-structured narrative interview method (Hollway and Jefferson, 2013). A sample of 6-8 students on the same courses were also interviewed. The student interviews used the same narrative interview method, but also incorporated participatory mapping. This form of graphic elicitation (Bagnoli, 2009) involved asking students to draw or write onto a map of the island on which they were studying to demarcate places with which they were particularly familiar or unfamiliar, or with which they had especially strong relationships. The method sought to disrupt the possibility of seeing the island as a single place in itself, and to explore the nuances of placed experiences among the smaller places of the island. Importantly, each of the three case studies can be seen as an 'outlier' case in relation to HE in the UK system more generally, exaggerating and therefore forcing a focus on the often unseen relationship between place and education.

The paper presents findings two key overall findings from the project. First, drawing on the policy and marketing documentary analysis, the paper discusses the conflict between the local and the global in HE, arguing that this conflict is particularly pertinent to island contexts while also being inherent to re-definitions of HE in a massified era (Marginson, 2016). In island locations, the conflict can be seen in the dual logic of employment-based HE policy discourses that seek to encourage more young people to stay on the islands in order to sustain and upskill existing workforces. At the same time, there are imperatives to provide HE that enables students to compete in a global employment marketplace. Similarly, HE marketing represents the uniqueness of island life as a key reason to stay or, in rare cases, to travel to the islands for degree study, while also highlighting the ways in which courses can provide opportunity for travel beyond the island during or after completion. In these examples, HE offers 'local capital' in the form of sustained economic and social relationships with the island and its smaller localities, at the same time as that 'local capital' gains status from its connections to and interchangeability with HE in other global contexts.

The second key finding from the project focuses on the relational construction of the island and the mainland of the UK as structuring decisions about HE and career futures. This finding refers to data

from tutor and student interviews in case study institutions, and draws on concepts from islands studies literature such as the contested construction of the island 'community' (Cohen, 1987) and the aquapalego (Alexander, 2015) in order to explore how the spatial story of what the island 'is' relies upon a concurrent construction of the mainland. These narratives bring together a complex range of structural factors such as economic costs and differential fee structures in different island locations, understandings of what a place provides or what is required from a place as an environment in which to study for a degree, perceptions of loyalty to family and place (Bright, 2011; Harris and Prout Quicke, 2019), and the significance of a sea-crossing as part of the process of leaving, returning to and constructing home as a place. These narratives demonstrate both the challenge and the importance of providing HE on island locations, as well as the ways in which HE on islands reveals the unseen spatial conditions of HE at a systemic level.